The Bridge Between

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, events, or locales is

purely coincidental.

To:

My parents–

Without your support (and editing) this book would not have been possible.

Thank you.

Annette–

Who planted a seed and helped it bloom.

Adina–

Without whom Act Two would have turned out very differently.

Finnigan O'Reilly–

My wonderful cover designer who brought the

vision to life.

Pat & Carrie–

A welcome source of inspiration.

And thank you to my community–

For your support in trying times.

Soundtrack

Recommended listening and music credits

Act One:

Dark Matter by Seratones

5 Days in May by Blue Rodeo*

Someone To Stay by Vancouver Sleep Clinic

Act Two:

Promise by Ben Howard

Inside Out by Spoon*

Keeps Me Light by Tall Heights*

Act Three:

Heartbeat by SAILR

Alive by Graeme James*

Call It Dreaming by Iron & Wine*

**Lyrics from these songs appear in the book.*

ACT ONE

Coalescence

Chapter One

Escape

The ground was frigid under my bare feet, icy grit and shards of shattered concrete digging deeper with every step. Cold air clawed at my lungs and naked arms as I scrambled over a concrete barricade. It was dark here on the edge of the compound with only the harsh sweep of the spotlights illuminating the ragged tangle of barbed wire and half-crumbled citadel walls standing between me and the outside world.

A shout echoed through my mind.

Its words were lost to me, but the voice was familiar, sharp-edged and grasping. I stumbled, foot catching on a chunk of rubble. The voices grew louder, threatening to surround me.

But I would not be stopped now, not when I was so close. I tore through the last tangle of wire, not even feeling where it snagged on skin and fabric alike.

It didn't matter.

I was through the wire, *free/free/free* crashing over in my head, as I ran for the hollow shelter of the city.

Sweat and drying blood stuck the thin and tattered hospital gown to my skin as I stumbled down the detritus strewn streets of the neighbourhood that surrounded the compound, the last shreds of adrenaline burning out of my veins and leaving me shaky. The homes here were rotted out, broken windows like gaping wounds. I could hear her still in my head, Redmind and the other Infected's voices fading to a dissonant hum at the edge of my hearing. Their presence dulled the farther I went until, at last, there was only silence.

My legs buckled, and I caught myself on the crumbling shell of what had once been a family's home. It looked like mine, something familiar in the angle of the roof or the shade of the peeling blue paint

on the door.

I looked up at the stars as I caught my breath.

I couldn't remember much from before the lab, time and place slipping like sand through my fingers, but some things remained, clinging.

It began over a decade ago when the first Infected was discovered. Nobody knew where the virus had come from, and in the end it hadn't really mattered. It acted a bit like a mushroom taking over a log, threading like mycelium through the body, leaving thin strands of white woven immutably through the skin until it reached the brain. From here it diverged, forming a white bone-like crest that extended from the host's head to mark the beginning of the infectious stage. The virus granted resilience to the body while the crest acted as a biological transceiver, telepathically connecting all Infected within a limited range.

The worst part was that the Infected were still *people* under the virus's influence, still *technically* capable of independent thought and action. But the virus twisted their minds, drove them to think and feel and *fear* all the same.

The Infected desired *control* more than anything, the safety of absolute stagnation. So, when some people — usually one or two out of every million — were found to be immune to the virus, Redmind and the city's other Infected had decided to take matters into their own hands. Redmind and her followers had rounded up every immune survivor they could find into her labs and began searching for a '*cure*' as she called it, for our deviance.

She hadn't succeeded until today.

I could hear them now.

Today, I had felt the first scouring brush of their voices through my head, a corruption marked by the first thin white threads of infection lacing out from the crook of my elbow. Redmind's efforts hadn't been a complete success, the threads spreading no wider than the width of my palm, and my own thoughts still hidden from them, but it was enough, a crack they could exploit.

Tonight, I had escaped their hold.

Now I had to make the most of it.

I breathed in the cold night air, the ground beneath my feet frosted with the first touch of winter as I eased myself upright. The cold worked in my favour tonight. It was the one durability the Infected lacked, rendering them slow and their bodies drawn towards hibernation.

The frigid air settled in my chest, cold and steadying. I straightened, ignoring the aches blooming across my body, and set out for home.

Chapter Two

Piece

Dawn came eventually.

I noticed dimly that the shallow slices across my arms and legs had mostly stopped bleeding as I slipped into the lee of the nearby buildings. The skyline was higher here, apartment buildings and ragged-topped offices outlined against the greying sky of early morning.

My limbs were heavy as I slipped inside a long-abandoned tourist shop and made my way through the debris to where moldering clothes hung like tattered afterimages in the shadows. I slumped gratefully into the overstuffed armchair tucked in the corner beside the changing rooms.

Without getting up, I tugged an old dress off its hanger, tearing the skirt from the bodice in the process. I flinched at the sound. Redmind's lab represented only a fraction of the Infected in the city, semi-isolated in case of breakout or other disasters, the rest — the bulk of the colony — lived here in the heart of the city.

Most of the city, like this shop, was still in rough shape, the result of first trade wars then eradication efforts. Neither had worked out in the end.

I tore the skirt further, wrapping half around one leg and repeating the process with the other. Retrieving another dress more carefully, I pulled it over myself, curling inward to retain as much heat as possible. *I'll just rest here for a few minutes*, I thought to myself, *then I'll keep moving*. Between one breath and the next, I fell asleep.

~

The humming woke me.

I bolted upright, blinking in the dim sunlight. I listened, every muscle tense, straining to catch the sound again. For a moment I

thought I had imagined it, present and memory smearing together.

It came again, echoing against the confines of my skull, closer this time.

I scrambled to my feet, pulling the dress I had used as a blanket snug around my shoulders. There were at least three groups that I could sense, moving slowly in a grid search pattern. They didn't know where I was, but they would find me if I stayed here.

I shoved my way out the emergency exit and into a narrow alley clogged with garbage.

And I ran.

I ran through the alley and out onto a side street, buildings looming over me like a wave. Thoughts loomed too, voices foreign to me, threatening to pull me back under, back into the past, mixing with memory to warp into something unknown and monstrous that seemed to stalk me from the shadows.

Time moved strangely, jittering along with the stretch and burn of my lungs and legs.

The hum faded with distance, replaced by the wind sighing through the surrounding skyscrapers' broken windows and the muffled hush of the first flakes of snow drifting down to rest ephemeral on the road.

The buildings were different here, more familiar. The high-rises once again gave way to smaller softer single-family homes and little independent storefronts.

The wind lifted again, carrying the scent of the sea with it.

I could see the bay now, the peaks of the bridge like ghosts in cold fog. They seemed to flicker in my vision, only visible out of the corner of my eye.

I was drawn to them, to the promise of home they held just out of reach.

I drifted up the deserted on-ramp and across the span of the bridge. The world made only of snow and fog and sea, memory as real as the pavement beneath my feet. A low roar of horns and engines and *voices* swirling around me, a ghost among ghosts, belonging nowhere.

I was on the other shore now; toll paid to the ferryman. This was the land of the dead, of ghosts, of forgotten abandoned things, of lives cut short.

I walked past the hollowed-out grocery stores and the skeletons of cars, up another shallow hill, spectres of memory pulling at me, plucking at the trailing hem of the gown, at myself, clinging.

Through familiar winding streets, children's laughter echoing in my chest, my face wet.

I stopped abruptly in front of a two-story house with a gently sloped roof and a dark blue door.

I was *home*.

The door opened to my touch, the air inside smelling of mildew.

Any last trace of warmth fled along with the ghosts, leaving me numb.

I pushed the door further open and stepped over the threshold into the entrance hall. Mold spotted the carpet letting out little puffs of spores as I moved forward, eyes fixed on the dusty picture frames lining the wall. I reached out to the closest and wiped away the dust from the cracked glass to reveal a family of three.

My mother was smiling, her hair short and her face younger than I remembered. Dad was grinning at the camera, his eyes glinting behind his glasses with a mixture of humour and *love*, no trace of grey in his hair.

They each had a hand on the shoulders of the kid — a girl around the age of seven, that I *didn't know, not anymore, who I wasn't anymore, who I had never been.*

It was Sami. Smiling at the camera, one front tooth missing, wispy brown hair curling at her tanned shoulders, her skin unmarred, her eyes bright and full of life.

The next — Sami again. She was very young here, perched on my grandmother's lap with a half-unwrapped gift clutched in her hands.

There was a blank spot, a little further down the hall, I brushed my fingers over the square of darker paint, feeling the pictures', *the memories',* loss like an axe blow to the chest.

The floor creaked above me, the unmistakable cadence of footsteps.

Someone was upstairs.

Chapter Three

Dawn

Mira

The day of the mission dawned cold and quiet.

Mira sat on her bed, adrenaline, impatience, and always, always that thread of fear weaving through her veins. *It would be worrying if you weren't scared,* she reminded herself sternly, watching the first hints of sunlight peek over the horizon through her window, her knee bouncing along with her heartbeat. It was nerve-wracking to leave the safety of the Demeter Base at the best of times but leaving now without permission *or* back up was even more so.

It was necessary, though. She would not allow any more casualties, not if she had a choice.

Worse, this mission would take her into the city, into the bombed-out heart of the Infected's territory. She'd seen them last time, crested in jagged white and utterly silent, moving with the exacting precision of a pack of wolves on the hunt. And when they had found their prey, she could do nothing but watch, hidden under debris as they surrounded her mentor, Wren, the woman who had taken her in and taught her everything she knew about engineering. She could only watch as they dragged her away, limp and silent, with white already lacing its way through her skin like lightning.

Those who remained at the base could do nothing, *nothing* except try to protect their own.

Most of the time, they couldn't even do that.

The Infected were growing bolder, spreading across more and more land with every passing year, quickly closing in on Mira's home. It was the last major holdout in the Atlantic provinces — an old military bunker left abandoned after the war, known now as Demeter Base. The cold drove the Infected back into the city every winter, slowing their limbs and minds, the only time of year it was safe to leave the base. But winters were shorter than they used to be, milder too, a

combination of climate change and war wreaking havoc on the environment, the lack of a global-informed weather tracking only adding more uncertainty.

Mira stood abruptly and paced around her room, fingers twisting in her blue woollen sweater. She stopped in front of the window, breathing deeply. The sun had risen further, glinting on the snow-bound trees, a clock ticking down in reverse.

It had been four years since Wren had been taken. Mira was no longer that helpless sixteen-year-old. She'd grown stronger, learned from her mistakes.

And she would *not* allow this to be another tragedy.

She exhaled slowly and intentionally, then smoothed down the sweater, hiked up her thick, olive-green cargo pants secured with a thin tablet-woven belt of rusty orange, taking comfort in the muted metallic *clink* of spare parts knocking together, and the hard-edged shape of her favourite wrench in the largest of its many pockets.

She turned from the window and looked over her gathered supplies: a grubby borrowed backpack with assorted clothes, candles, and medical supplies, with space set aside for the food she had yet to pick up, with her hat, woollen gloves, and patched burnt orange winter coat bundled atop it. She'd stashed the rest of her gear in the truck over the last few days so as to be more inconspicuous. With nothing else to do, and an anxious itch all down her back, she left her supplies stacked on her neatly made bed, tugged her worn-soft copper bandanna more snugly against her head, took one last look at the rising sun, and left.

She headed for the hangar first. She needed to make sure her team had everything they needed while she was away. Had everything they needed if she didn’t come back.

She made her way through the tunnels, steel-toed leather combat boots thudding dully against the stone floor. Water dripped from the rock walls in places and down into carefully carved channels. The lights, still set to pre-dawn dim, glinted off the moving water as Mira followed its winding path to the atrium.

She stopped at the entrance, the stream beside her now grown and joined with others, cascaded off the short cliff into the pool below, giving off spray that turned to rainbow as the lights came up. The atrium was one of Mira’s favourite places in the base, even in winter

as it was now, when all the plants were asleep. It was a huge open space the size of two large airplane hangars, because that's what the space used to be, its roof a patchwork of scavenged glass that still let in plenty of light in the summer, though covered now to protect it from the snow and ice. The garden that spanned a little more than half the space was bare, resting between the harvest of the hardy winter squashes and the spring plantings that would begin in about four months. The garden was surrounded by dormant fruit trees and bushes and a mix of other medicinal plants, with a pair of beehives just past them. The rest of the animals — a small flock of heritage sheep and goats, a handful of pigs, and a sizable flock of chickens — were kept in another slightly smaller hangar just past this one, and Mira could already hear their muted complaints as they waited for their breakfast.

Descending the shallow ramp beside the waterfall took her past a large vent blowing geothermal-heated air into the space. A helpless little smile tugged at her face as the warm air washed over her, swirling up memories. The air system was also left over from the base's former inhabitants, and Mira had helped repair part of it a few years after she'd arrived. It had been a test of her engineering ability before she was allowed to work on the Artemis project. A project she ran now, in Wren's stead.

She remembered the warmth the most, the comforting press of metal surrounding her and the other engineers as they crawled through the vents. To the untrained eye, the vents may seem like a three-dimensional labyrinth, unnavigable and claustrophobic, but to her they were where every turn and drop could be memorized, and every weakness or mistake could be fixed with the right tools. To her, they were *safe*.

Mira continued down the ramp and followed the smooth stone path as it wound around the shrubbery. She crossed the atrium and descended back into the rock on the other side, following the path, well-worn in her mind, that led to the hangar.

She emerged into another open space, this one covered, not in soil or water, but in machinery, scrap metal, and, most importantly, the nearly complete hull of the *Artemis*. She had been here long before Mira arrived, an ancient derelict spaceship that had been too far gone for even the base's former occupants' last desperate operation. Now she'd been almost completely overhauled, only the superstructure and a few pieces of vital tech remaining from her previous incarnation. The patchwork metal of the hull gleamed under the lights, ending in a

ragged but slowly closing line where the stern had been left open to accommodate the installation of the ship's main engine yesterday.

Now it was almost just a matter of finishing touches, tests, and furnishing the interior.

Almost.

Mira retrieved her toolbox from the locker room and climbed the staging surrounding the hull. She ran her fingers across the metal, tracing the carefully welded seams that joined each piece to the next like an intricate tapestry. She followed them to the forward hatch and stepped through the hole that would soon be an airlock, blinking at the dimness before making her way to the cockpit. It was brighter here with the expanse of the windshield, which only drew more blatant attention to the gaping, shadowed hole in the control console where the navigation computer should be. Wires from the surrounding panels reached for it like hands outstretched, waiting for the final piece they needed for the ship to fly. A piece they would soon have, if Mira's mission today went as planned.

She stared at the waiting wires for a long moment, eyes unfocused and thoughts tumbling over each other like pebbles in storm-swell, before shaking herself. Mira double and triple-checked the specs the nav unit would need to fit and climbed back out the hatch and onto the scaffolding. She knew what she was looking for, had memorized as much information as she could find on the nav unit. Her techs had spent months trying to make one, but there was just too much sensitive data they were missing; all the units at the airport had been corrupted with radiation, and all the ships that had belonged to the base had burned up on the way down or been left to drift.

In short, there was no other choice.

Mira distracted herself with checking over the ports for the thrusters that speckled the skin of the ship, occasionally adding to the list of things that needed to be done. Eventually, she heard conversation echoing from the tunnel leading back to the atrium, signalling the arrival of the day shift.

Mira took a moment to center herself before climbing down from her perch.

Spotting Aspen, she waved over her second in command and hoped her mask of nonchalance would hold up under scrutiny.

Aspen greeted her with a bright smile. Their dark, tightly curled hair forming a diffuse halo under the LED lights and bouncing in time to their steps. They were taller than Mira — who was on the shorter side — and built like a particularly sturdy tank with a thick waist and well-muscled limbs.

Aspen's smile dimmed as they studied her face, noticing some crack in Mira's armour. She forced a smile to cover it, finger tapping restlessly on the handle of her toolbox.

Aspen didn't seem to buy it. "What's up, boss?" they asked, tone somewhere between curious and concerned.

"How do you feel about taking on some extra responsibility for the next couple of days?" she replied, voice deliberately light.

Aspen's smile faded completely, replaced with the beginnings of a frown, but they nodded anyway and gestured for her to continue.

"I noticed a few inconsistencies in the air system report from last night, and I'd like to take the next few days to get it sorted out."

Aspen stared at her, frown etching deeper into their face. Mira knew why, recognized her own habits well enough to know that this request would be received with suspicion at best and abject concern at worst. Mira followed through, no matter what. Leaving now, to apparently work on a low-priority project that she would usually have delegated, gnawed at her, twisted the knife in her gut, but if she didn't go, and go alone, it would be someone else on the chopping block.

She couldn't allow that. She had to succeed, too, otherwise they'd be right back where they started. She hoped Aspen wouldn't be next to go if she failed, another needless death on her postmortem conscience.

Aspen glanced up at the cockpit and back to Mira, their brow furrowed. They studied her for a long moment, an understanding dawning in their eyes that was quickly swallowed by worry and followed with reluctant acceptance.

"There's no way I can talk you out of this, is there?" they asked, quietly.

Mira dropped her mask. "No. I need to do this. I won't put anyone else at risk."

"I could come with you, watch your back —"

"Someone needs to watch the shop, to be ready to lead if I don't come back. You're the only one I trust to keep them safe."

Aspen's face twisted at the blatant manipulation, but Mira could tell they saw the logic in her words.

"You know where you're going? Have everything you need?"

Mira nodded. "The old shipyard should have it. I'm already packed. This" — Mira hefted the toolbox — "was the last thing I needed."

Aspen ground their jaw. "The shipyard is in *their* territory. Are you sure there isn't another option? The airport maybe?"

"The airport's been picked clean, and you know it," Mira snapped, then blew out a breath and continued, quieter. "Look, I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't our only option. It should be cold enough to be safe for the next few days."

Aspen raised an eyebrow.

"Fine. Safe-*er*," Mira acquiesced, shifting her weight before steadying again.

She met Aspen's gaze and held it. She saw the moment they broke and almost wished they hadn't.

Aspen dragged a hand over their face, shoulders slumping as if under immense weight.

"Fine," they sighed, "fine, just… stay safe, alright? We need you here if we're going to get this thing in the air."

She could feel the ship looming over her, already echoing with the footsteps of her crew. The knife made another slow rotation, some squared-off edge scraping against one of her ribs.

"I'll be back," she promised. "I have to —"

She was cut off, enveloped in Aspen's hug.

Mira could feel the eyes, the lives of her crew weighing on her, but for a moment, just for a moment, she let herself be held under their aegis.

It wouldn't last.

It never did.

With a wave to Aspen, Mira left, heading back through the tunnels. She wanted to go back, to find some delicate wiring task that needed doing and sink herself into it for the rest of the day. But that leisure was not for her. She had a job to do, and she would get it done.

She picked up some food from the kitchens, requested under the guise of working in the vents for a few days, and almost twice what she would need if everything went to plan.

Something told her it wouldn't.

Time seemed to blur, and suddenly she was back at her room.

She blinked, went in and sat on her bed for a long moment, her eyes moved like she was trying to memorize the space, but she saw nothing.

Eventually, she let out a ragged breath, stood, put on her coat, hat, and gloves, slung the backpack — now complete with food — over her shoulder, and picked up her toolbox with numb fingers.

She left her room tidy, and the door unlocked.

~

She walked straight for the garage like she was meant to be there, careful to keep her shoulders relaxed and pace even. She knew Mark, her longtime friend, was running an intensive fuel experiment today, so he was unlikely to be seen outside his lab. It was still early enough in the day that she only passed a few people, but she could feel the compounding itch of their gaze as she walked. It was almost a relief to slip into the cavernous space. As it was uninhabited most of the time, the garage was kept cooler than the rest of the base, though still above freezing.

Her breath steamed as she wove her way to the front and the huge door that led outside. The space was crowded with vehicles — a few closed-cab dune buggies and a much larger flatbed truck among others — but in the end, she had settled for an electric pickup truck with a spacious bed, pop-proof tires, and fully self-contained air system. It would do. Hopefully.

She loaded her supplies into the passenger seat, checked that the camping gear was still stashed in the covered bed, and headed for the

control office. There, she found the truck's keys and tucked them safely into a pocket before booting up the office computer and tapping into the external cameras.

She watched the grainy feed for a long moment, scanning each of the few dozen angles for even a hint of movement. She found nothing, and it was a dreaded relief.

Gritting her teeth, she opened the hangar door control system and programmed it to open, wait thirty seconds, then close and lock behind her.

She executed the program and ran for the truck as the door groaned and began its rumbling accent.

She slammed the cab door closed, any noise now covered by the metallic screech of the hangar door as it reached its peak and stopped. She glanced at the supplies, only half seeing them as she fumbled the key into the ignition and twisted, the truck slipping to silent life marked only by the blurred lights of the dashboard. One seemed out of place but —

Mira stared out the windshield into the snow-dusted forest that ringed the base and for a moment wished…

She shook her head, chest tight. It didn't matter what she wished. This needed to be done, and she would be the one to do it. And if she didn't come back?

Well.

At least she'd have tried.

The door began its descent, and Mira urged the truck forward, clearing the exit at the last moment to emerge into the frozen forest. The door closed behind her, its lock engaging automatically with a quiet *thunk* that felt more like a gunshot.

She blew out a breath, shifted her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, and proceeded down the long access road that would connect to the highway and eventually to the city.

She stopped again after a handful of meters. It was the crack and hiss of the gravel under her wheels, like shifting debris moments from total collapse, that played with her mind. It was the continuous flashes of white in the corner of her vision, at once sun reflecting off ice and

white crested heads watching from the trees.

She wrenched open the center console and riffled through the meagre collection of music CDs she found there.

Most were unfamiliar, but the last she recognized.

She brushed her thumb over the cracked plastic case, silvered fractures distorting the dark blue and luminous orange of the cover. *Blue Rodeo* it proclaimed, and further down, *5 Days In May*.

She opened it slowly and slid the disk into the CD player that had been retrofitted into the truck's dash.

Warmth rushed through her at the first brush of harmonica and the steady pulse of the drums.

She cranked the volume and was submerged in the sound, memory mixing with reality and the taste of salt in the back of her throat.

Sometimes the world begins, sets you up on your feet again — I know it wipes the tears from your eyes, it sang, drawled words blurring around the edges with the effects of time.

She could feel the sun on her skin from that day, remembered Wren singing along with the music and the then-comforting weight of her mentor's toolbox on her lap, the same toolbox that now rested on the floor of the passenger seat.

The album was decades old, made before the Infected, before the war, before the loss. Though degraded at the edges, its connection, its *love,* rang true, even now.

Mira barely noticed turning onto the highway (or what had passed for one in Nova Scotia). The surface was deeply pitted with years of unmitigated frost heave; line markers reduced to mere flecks of colour. The sun was gone, hidden behind heavy clouds, but she could still feel an echo of its warmth.

~

She'd listened all the way through the album and was just starting a second round when she reached the city suburbs.

She slowed down. The area was less dilapidated than she'd expected, not in *good* condition by any means — peeling paint, broken

windows, and semi-collapsed roofs overburdened with snow spoke of years of neglect, shadows hiding who knows what inside, but most had not fallen down yet, nor was there any sign of the Infected.

Probably all holed up against the cold somewhere, she thought.

She kept going, towards the bridge that would take her on the most direct route to the shipyard. The first few flakes of snow fell, then tumbled in a sudden gust of wind cutting across an opening created by a small park to her right.

But I know my past, you were there, for everything I've done… The music tapered off into a hollow kind of silence, a revelation followed closely by a lurch from the truck as it rolled to a stop. The dash lights flickered once with *critically low battery* before they died completely, and she was left to the dim comforts of an incoming snowstorm.

Shit.

She felt her breathing pick up, skin already chilled with sweat in the rapidly cooling air. There was no airflow; the truck was sealed and had its own air supply, but the pumps didn't work without power and there was no way to override them manually. The cab was cramped, most of the wheelbase dedicated to the bed space, no room to light even a candle safely even if she wanted to, which she didn't, considering the air situation.

"Ok, Mira, breathe, you can figure this out. You have supplies, and you have a dead truck. What are we going to do about it?"

The plurality seemed to help, to add a collective solidarity to her words.

It was only wishful thinking now, an echo of a connection long severed, but if it helped…

She sucked in a long breath and held it for a few seconds, letting her lungs harvest the oxygen, then blew it out slowly.

"We can't stay here. We'll either run out of air or die of exposure. No one knows where we are except Aspen, and they're not expecting us back for a few days, so we're on our own." She took another long breath and took stock.

Quickly thickening snow, she noted, *and no active power grid, so no point in trying to recharge today with the solar panels. There's an open*

park with no windbreaks, houses with broken windows — no help there, but the house with the blue door looks mostly intact. We'll scout it first, then come back for the gear.

She tugged her woollen toque lower over her ears, secured a filter mask firmly over her mouth and nose, zipped up her coat and buttoned the collar, and pulled on her gloves, but not before retrieving a flashlight from her pack and the large wrench from her pocket.

The weight of it in her hands was soothing as she cracked open the door with a hiss of released air. The temperature had dropped drastically since this morning, snow-laden clouds casting the world into shadow.

She closed — and locked, just to be safe — the truck behind her, suddenly feeling very exposed.

The snow swallowed the sound of her footsteps as she crept towards the house, breath billowing out in front of her.

The door creaked open under her touch, revealing a dark, but otherwise uninhabited, hallway flanked on the left by a staircase leading to the second floor. She clicked on her flashlight and went inside.

There were pictures hanging in the hallway, cracked glass glinting jaggedly in the cast light. Mira didn't stop to look, didn't need another family to mourn.

She made her way further in.

Something had gotten in at some point, a couple of raccoons or a particularly angry pack of squirrels by the look of it. The kitchen, living room, and little attached apartment were dank, musty, and frankly trashed, not somewhere she'd want to set up camp. She headed upstairs, testing each step was sound before proceeding.

It was much better up there, the space spared by the animals, and smelling only of stale air and dust.

The stairway opened up into a small sitting area with a couch and coffee table tucked in against the wall, out of the path leading to the two bedrooms. She checked both and found them unoccupied. The smaller room looked like it had belonged to a kid, little glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling. The other was more spartan but clearly

lived in, most of the space taken up by a huge bed with a small dresser tucked in the back like an afterthought. Both were opposite a small bathroom located on the other side of the sitting area.

Mira nodded to herself. It would do.

~

She brought her supplies in quickly, even colder out now than it was before, and deposited them off to the side for the moment.

Using the couch, coffee table, and a collection of scavenged blankets, she constructed a kind of fort that would be much easier to keep at a livable temperature than trying to heat the whole space.

She froze in the middle of laying out her sleeping bag at a whisper of sound from outside. At first, she thought she had imagined it; wind playing tricks on her, but no — it came again, louder, closer.

She curled her hand around the shaft of the wrench in her pocket as the door groaned open downstairs, drew it at the dull echo of footsteps on the stairs.

Someone else was in the house.

Chapter Four

Conciliation

I started up the stairs in a trance.

The aged wood gave a little under my weight, feeling like it was going to collapse beneath my feet and send me into free fall.

It was *bright* above me, the light uneven and half obscured, and still enough to make my eyes water after the darkness downstairs.

I was brought up short a few steps from the top.

A woman stood in my path, silhouetted against the flickering illumination. She held a large wrench in her white-knuckled grasp, arm crooked like she was about to take a swing at my head.

"Who are you?" she demanded, voice scared more than angry.

Her hands were shaking.

“I’m Sa- Soren. My name is Soren.” I stumbled over the name, unfamiliar to my tongue, but it *felt* right. "Who are *you*?"

"Are you Infected?" she interrupted, voice cracking slightly on the last word.

"No — I'm immune."

Not for lack of trying on Redmind's part.

Her eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, searching for any trace of white, the wrench dropping a fraction when she didn't find any.

"Why are you here?" she asked, tone a little softer now. She looked… tired.

"I was looking for home," I replied and tried to ignore the catch in my throat at the word. She dropped her arm to her side, swinging

gently with the tool's weight. With one more scrutinizing look, she stepped aside to let me up the rest of the stairs.

It was much cleaner here than downstairs, my — *Sami's* room — preserved almost exactly the way it had been before. What I could see of my parents' room was much the same, but stripped of blankets, blankets that had been draped between the couch and the overturned coffee table to create a makeshift tent.

I couldn't linger on them now, not with the creeping itch of eyes on me, a potential threat at my back. I shifted enough to see her out of the corner of my eye.

And she *should* have been a threat; well-built, well-outfitted, and armed, even if it was only with a wrench. There was a wariness to her, an air of mingled fear and abject exhaustion that my own body echoed. But there was a warmth there too, beside the fear in equal measure. For some strange reason, she felt… *Safe.*

Like the release of a long-held breath.

I turned to face her fully as she scrubbed a hand across her face, the other slipping the wrench into her pant pocket with a practised movement.

"It's good to meet you, Soren," she said finally, voice rough with fading adrenaline. "I'm Mira."

"Why are you here?"

Mira scowled, though it seemed directed at herself. "I was looking for… a piece of equipment, but my truck ran out of battery. I needed somewhere protected to set up camp, and this house was the closest."

Her thoughts seemed to drift for a moment, eyes flickering before she shook herself. "Sorry, you must be freezing. Come sit down, I was just about to get the heater going."

I was cold, now that she mentioned it, joints stiff and muscles protesting as I followed her into the makeshift tent.

"I have some extra clothes you could use, if you want to change," she said distractedly as she rummaged through a worn backpack. She looked up when I hesitated just inside the tent and gestured for me to sit on the sleeping bag rolled out across from her. "They might be a bit big though," she continued, emerging from the pack with a bundle of

soft-looking cloth, apparently successful. "How old are you, anyway?" she asked as she handed me the bundle.

I thought for a moment. "Twenty, I think. Time got a little" — I made a vague gesture that did little to demonstrate any actual meaning — "hazy there, for a while."

She nodded like she understood, gaze focused on arranging a cluster of sweet-smelling candles on a ceramic dish as I studied my borrowed clothes.

They felt even softer than they looked, worn yet sturdy, resilient, warm.

The lab stuck to my skin, a combination of old sweat, dried blood, and thin fabric meant more for the convenience of others than comfort.

I needed to be free of it, *now*, before it could mark me further.

I snatched a water flask and stumbled back out into the cold, fresh clothes clutched tight to my chest. Mira called after me, her tone concerned, but her words were lost to an imagined hum and the catch of blood-stiffened fabric.

I locked the bathroom door behind me.

The towels were still hanging neatly on their racks, their deep blue giving way to a pale sun-bleached beige from the light of the window above them.

I stared at them, hands frozen on ragged hem. *Where did they go? My family was* **here***, I* **know** *they were here. Where did they go?*

I couldn't remember. Whole years just *gone*. Not without trace but without anchor in time or place. They left me adrift.

I ripped off the gown, letting it fall to the tiled floor in a sodden heap.

My hair was long, just past my shoulders, and filthy with dirt and grease. It curled trailing and possessive hands around my throat, but there wasn't enough water here to do anything about it, so I tied it up with one of my mother's old hairbands to deal with later.

I wetted a washcloth with the flask and scrubbed until my skin

turned pink. The water revealed things under the grime: the raw-rubbed bands of bruises around my wrists, ankles, hips, and chest, the scattering of thin cuts from my flight through the city, and the thin web of woven white lacing out from the crook of my left elbow. The mark of precise, immutable brutality.

I knew it was there; I'd been awake, but it was a part of me now, permanently, and there was nothing I could do about it.

You're safe, I tried, *you're safe. They won't survive the snow to come looking. They couldn't — they* **won't** *finish the job.*

I closed my eyes, breathed until my pulse faded from my ears and the clutch of my ribs eased, if only a little.

~

Mira's clothes were warm when I pulled them on: a thick, loose-fitting blue long-sleeved shirt, slightly fuzzy rusty red woollen pants tied at the waist with a thin braided belt, and thick wool socks. They were too big, but at that moment, I only cared that they were clean and warm.

"You alright?" Mira asked as I stepped back into the tent, setting the flask where I'd found it.

She hadn't moved from earlier, just taken a cushion from the couch to sit on, leaving the sleeping bag for me. I could smell the candles burning, sweet and smoky, under the clay pot between us. The air was already warmer, even with the tent flap she'd left open for air flow.

Alright was a very subjective state in my experience, but for now… "Yeah."

"Thanks," I added after a beat, "for the clothes."

"No problem," she said, tone carefully light.

I could feel her studying me and resisted the urge to shift away, to hide. Movement only drew attention.

I still couldn't repress my flinch at her next words.

"That looks like a pretty nasty bruise on your wrist. Do you have any other injuries? I have a first aid kit with me, you're welcome to use it if you'd like." Her voice was soft, but it still cut deep.

"No," I snapped, trying and failing to keep the desperation from my voice.

She stayed very still, cautious. "Are you sure?"

You have open wounds that were exposed to dirt, some small, more reasonable part of my mind pointed out. *Dirt leads to infection, to illness. Illness means you won't be able to run when they come for you.*

I released a long, careful breath. "Fine."

She gave me a small smile as she handed over a bundle of folded fabric, but I couldn't sense any ill intent behind her actions. She *was* hiding something, I was sure of that, something to do with where she came from and why she was here, but despite that, she felt safe, like the first hint of sun on the horizon. The possibility of warmth.

I took the bundle.

Mira nodded to herself and pointedly turned away to draw a small notebook and pen from her bag.

I took a breath and unrolled the bundle to find a small bottle of rubbing alcohol, gauze, bandages, and other expected items.

I peeked over at Mira where she sat staring blankly at her notebook, pencil spinning idly between her fingers.

I shook myself and began disinfecting my forearms and legs where the worst of the cuts were, working my way up mechanically, hardly feeling the burn of the alcohol. I pushed up the sleeves of the shirt and froze at Mira's sharp intake of breath.

Her eyes were fixed on the web of white at my elbow, hand outstretched in the direction of the water flask.

"You said you were immune," she said, voice quiet and sharp-edged.

I couldn't meet her eye, instead watching numbly as my fingers dug into my opposing arm, gauze trapped between fingers and tinged with blood.

"I am, I *swear I am*. I got out before she could weaponize it. She — Redmind, their scientist — is trying to break the immunity, the rest didn't survive her experiments, but I —" I gulped in a breath. "She managed to establish a mental link just before I left. I — I can hear

them. In my head. When they're nearby. But I can't infect anyone."

"Can they hear you?" Mira asked carefully, voice losing some of its steel.

"No, they — it's a one-way connection."

I could hear them even now, a jagged-edged dissonant hum at the cusp of my hearing, that grew ever louder, ever closer. I curled in on myself, grasping for any modicum of cover, no matter how ineffective.

Mira released a breath and reached out, slowly like she was approaching a cornered animal. She took hold of my hand and tugged gently until I let my arm go, white rimmed red crescents dug into the skin there.

She held on, her hands startlingly warm, rough with calluses but unmistakably *human*.

"Good. That's good, Soren. Can you tell if there are any close by right now? Were you followed?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, tried to sort fact from the miasma of memory and paranoia, and didn't quite manage it.

"I don't think so," I gasped, opening my eyes. "It's hard to tell, my head is… Loud."

An understatement.

"That's alright, just breathe with me, yeah? Come on now, deep breaths."

I matched her exaggerated breaths. At some point, she had shifted around to my side of the tent, a solid anchor in wind-whipped sea.

The storm eased after a while, the world swathed in lingering haze as I listed sideways into sleep.

Chapter Five

Ghosts

I dreamed of warmth.

I was there, *home*, before everything. The air was sweet with the scent of pastries baking downstairs and morning sunlight streaming in through the windows. I was a child again, lying on my bed, eyes idly tracing the patterns of stars across the ceiling. I'd been fascinated with space before, digging up any information I could about the lunar base that was then under construction. I wondered if they had ever finished it.

The bamboo floor was smooth underfoot as I wandered through the hall and down the stairs, the light outside shifting and shadows deepening towards twilight with every step.

The pictures in the entrance hall were intact, but the images blurred under scrutiny.

Music drew me past them and into the kitchen. My dad had pulled out a chair from the dining table, a bucket propped at his feet to catch the corn husks as he shucked them from the cob. He smiled when he saw me, but his face was indistinct, hazy, like the pictures.

My mom was in the kitchen, silhouetted by the setting sun out the window behind her as she pulled eclair shells from the oven and set them aside to cool before turning back to the pots on the stove, her features obscured.

A burst of sound called me into my grandmother's attached apartment. I answered, footsteps picking up speed as the world behind me dimmed. It was dark outside now, a complete, looming kind of darkness that seemed to leach in through the windows and eat away at the corners of my grandmother's room.

She sat in her blue recliner, dark hair haloed by the out-of-focus white-grey smear of her cat. The air here smelled both of the sweet,

clean scent of her shampoo and the sharper tinge of drying acrylic paint. Her walls were covered in paintings — landscapes mostly — each marked with the thin white strokes of her signature.

She turned her blurred face to me and gestured for me to sit. I curled onto her couch, and she turned her attention back to the ancient TV set.

The screen showed nothing but static.

I looked back for her, reaching out, and was met with abyss.

I was alone in the TV glow.

The darkness circled, consumed that last remnant of light and, with a hum that shook the very air, swallowed me whole.

~

I woke to the smell of food. I gasped, jolting upright, shoving the blanket aside, and immediately curling over with the protests of my abused muscles. It was light outside, just passed dawn by the quality of it. Mira was sitting across from me, stirring the contents of a metal container propped atop the ceramic heater. She had startled when I woke, and I could feel her eyes on me now.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, smearing the moisture there.

"How long was — was I out?" I rasped.

Mira handed over the water flask before answering, waited until I had taken my fill.

"You were asleep for about eighteen hours. It's the next morning now," she replied carefully. "I tried to wake you after the first dozen hours, but you were out cold."

She hesitated. "You were calling for someone in your sleep. Is there —"

"What are you making?" I asked a little desperately, cutting her off.

She studied me for a moment before dropping her eyes to the now steaming makeshift pot.

"It's a vegetable stew with rice, beans, and a bit of freeze-dried

chicken. I brought it from — from home. Would you like some? I have extra."

"Yes, thank you," I said and winced at the loud growl from my stomach.

Mira smiled at the sound and ladled out some of the stew into a waiting collapsible bowl. She handed it over along with a spoon and a slice of warm, crusty bread that I hadn't noticed before.

The bowl was warm in my hands, the stew perfuming the air with the scent of herbs that I couldn't identify, not anymore, but they felt *familiar*. Its surface was sheened with rainbow droplets of oil, partially obscuring its heavier contents. I blew on it and was met with a billow of steam, the surface rippling with my breath.

Deciding it was too hot to eat straight, I took up the bread and dipped it reverently into broth. I bit and chewed, savored its rich warmth, already the best meal I'd had in a long, long time.

My bowl emptied quickly after that.

~

I must have dozed off again at some point, because when I woke, I was alone.

I blinked, panic and confusion setting in.

Had Mira been a dream, too?

No. No, I was covered by an unfamiliar blanket, hers — I'd seen her using it before, and when I twisted around to look, there was a note beside me, written on a scrap of paper.

"Soren— " the note read, *"You're safe. I'm outside checking on the truck. Back soon. —Mira"*

I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and used her absence to take stock.

My body ached with a combination of cuts, bruises, and far overworked muscles, but I was warm, clothed, and I had eaten well not too long ago. My various cuts, when I checked, carefully avoiding my left inner arm, were clean and treated, and the deeper ones had been bandaged. *Could be worse.*

From there, things got a little more grim. I had food, water, and heat as long as Mira stayed here, but she would leave soon, either heading further into the city or back home. Once she was gone, I'd be alone.

I had no supplies aside from the borrowed clothes on my back and whatever I could scavenge from — from the house. This place was hollowed out, nothing remaining but forgotten belongings and fragmented memories.

Its light had gone out a long time ago and left it cold. Dark. *Singular*.

I was on the stairs before I realized it, Mira's blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

It was darker downstairs, enough light coming through the grimy windows that I could make out the shadowed bulk of destroyed furniture, but not much else. The pictures were just visible, their figures ghostly in the reflected snow-light, a row of stagnant snapshots.

I slumped down to the floor at the base of the stairs, staring, absorbing every now-useless detail. There was nothing new here, no further future to be gained, yet I couldn't turn away.

Mira found me there a while later, curled up and wedged in a corner, staring at the pictures.

She hesitated, but eased down beside me a few meters away, and just sat for a while, looking at the pictures. I watched out of the corner of my eye as the snow on her boots slowly melted to pool on the ruined floor.

"This… used to be my home, but I don't think it is anymore," I said finally, breaking the silence.

"Do you have anywhere, any*one* you could stay with that would be safe?" she replied quietly.

"No, I don't think so, it's all… Gone."

She hummed at this, thoughtful, eyes dropping from the pictures.

"Would… you *like* somewhere to go?" she asked finally.

I choked out a slightly manic laugh. "Well, my options as it stands right now are to either stay here until I freeze to death or go back to Redmind, so if you have an alternative, I'd love to hear it."

“Not everything is gone,” Mira said slowly. "I'm part of a community — the Demeter Base, a little ways north of here. We converted an old military facility from the war, now we have indoor gardens, electricity, and running water. You could come back with me, if you want.”

I turned to face her fully, eyes wide.

"Seriously?" I asked.

She nodded, watching me carefully.

"I didn't think there were any holdouts left. Redmind said you had been wiped out years ago. How have you survived so long?" I frowned as a new thought occurred to me. "And why would you come this close to the city?"

Mira bit her lip, glanced around as if she was worried someone would overhear, leaning in as she spoke. “We’re working on something, a ship — a *star*ship — called the *Artemis* —”

“That’s not possible,” I interrupted, “there were starships before the war, but they were all destroyed, the crews burned on the way down. Where would you even get the parts?”

“Not all of them were destroyed. That’s why I'm here, well —” Her brows furrowed briefly. “Not here, here, but where I was headed, the old shipyard on the other side of the bay. We — *I* need one of their astro-navigation units to finish the control systems for the ship. My truck running out of battery was *not* part of the plan.”

I gave her a small smile. “Certainly wouldn't help.”

She smiled back, then let it fall. “*Artemis* is a scouting ship, mostly. Our plan is to move all our people to the Luna 1 Base on the moon where they'll be able to live safely, but first we need to be sure the base is habitable and… *uninhabited*."

She took a breath. "I would never ask you to go back into the city, of course, but if you stay here while I get the part, you can come back to Demeter with me if you want.”

I studied her face for any trace of deceit or self-interest and found none.

“I'd like that," I said slowly, uncertainty warring with hope and the echo of *live* and *safe* in my chest. "Thank you."

Mira nodded, the beginnings of a blush playing along her cheeks. "I've set up the truck's solar panels, so the battery should be full by the end of the day. I'll head out in the morning and be back for you around midday at the latest."

"What will you do if you come across an Infected?" I asked.

She shrugged, shifting in her seat. "Run like hell, I suppose, not much else I can do." Her bravado rang false, a mask.

"Uh huh. How much do you know about their territory, their patterns, their methods?"

Her mask cracked, brows furrowing. "Very little," she said, quieter. "I'm mostly working off old satellite images and scraped together intel we've managed to gather over the years. I have a mask that can filter out airborne infectious material, and I'm… somewhat familiar with their methods." Her gaze grew distant. "I saw them, years ago now. They — they took someone, someone important, right in front of me. They were so… *quiet*."

I watched her, took in the vacant look in her eyes, the echoing loss, the subtle tremor of her hands. I thought about what I could remember of my time at Redmind's lab, the pain, the fear, the creeping white-veined consumption, and decided in that moment that I would do whatever it took to make sure Redmind never had the opportunity to hurt anyone again, that this would not be another tragedy.

"What if I came with you?" I blurted before I'd really processed the words. "Into the city, I mean."

That got her attention. Her head whipped up, staring at me with wide eyes.

"*What*?" she asked emphatically. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, pushing aside the twist in my gut at the idea of going back. "I can be your ears. It's the least I can do. One mission for a new chance *and* depriving Redmind of more victims? Seems like a good

deal to me. Besides," I continued, hoping to speak truth into my words, "the cold should keep us safe."

Chapter Six

Reckoning

The rest of the day slid by in a blur of planning and packing. We pored over Mira's maps together; they were grainy with time, but I was able to add to them a few extra scraps of information that could be useful. Redmind's lab was closest to the shipyard, the bulk of the Infected colony further off in the heart of the city. We plotted routes and alternatives, preparing for the possibility of snow or rubble blocking the road. The weather remained cold, and we had hope it would stay that way.

I found a pair of my mother's old winter boots and my dad's coat in one of the closets upstairs. Their warmth felt good, durable, like it wouldn't leave me even once I took it off.

Mira cut my hair short, warm breath brushing against my exposed neck as she told me more about Demeter Base, her favourite nooks to read in, and the intricacies of the vent system. She described the *Artemis* in more detail, rambling about everything from the hull plating to the smallest minutiae of the colour-coded wiring system. I watched her eyes in the mirror as she talked about it, shining with a mixture of exhilaration, grief, and pride.

I felt lighter afterwards.

By the end of the day, we were as ready as we could be, everything not vitally important already packed into the now-recharged truck so we could be on the road as early as possible.

Mira found me downstairs that evening, watching the candlelight flicker across the cracked picture frames. They seemed to move in the corner of my vision, but I was always too late to catch them. I had combed through the rest of the house already, found the ravaged living room, the rusted-out kitchen, the water-damaged and mildewed paintings. Besides a few pieces of clothing, these pictures were all that remained even vaguely intact. I felt like a ship in a storm-sea, anchor down and desperately reaching for the bottom as the waves washed

me adrift.

She sat beside me, a ragged reef, a rock shelf, a wind break.

She listened as I talked about them, faded memories from before, listened when I told her I wasn't the girl in the pictures, not anymore, and really, never was. And she listened, our knees bumping as I told about what I couldn't remember, the dark voids in my mind that swallowed names, years, and countless other forgotten things.

She sat with me as I mourned what was gone, what had happened, and what could have been.

~

Dawn came eventually.

We loaded the truck with the remainders, breath puffing steam into the chilled air as we climbed into the cab. Mira settled a dented toolbox at my booted feet — there was really nowhere else to put it — and took a breath, squeezing her eyes shut as she twisted the key in the ignition. The dashboard lit with a flurry of lights, a low rolling song drifting from the sound system.

Mira fumbled with the controls to turn off the music, but I stopped her.

"Wait," I said, "leave it on, I — I haven't heard music in years."

She bit her lip. "Won't it interfere with your" — she gestured vaguely at her head — "hearing?"

"I don't think so, different system."

Mira nodded. "If you're sure."

"I am but… maybe keep it quiet, just in case."

Mira gave me a tight smile and urged the truck into motion. It rolled soundlessly forward through the few centimeters of snow. I closed my eyes after a few minutes, watching the shadows of the overhanging tree limbs drift like clouds across my eyelids as I listened to the steady kick of the drum and the high rasp of the harmonica. It was like a heartbeat, steady and steadfast, the rigid structure that wouldn't be warped by the pressures of the other instruments.

The song changed and I opened my eyes to find an expanse of sun-

lit water flanking us on either side and the dun-coloured roadway of the city bridge. I could see the over-half-a-kilometer-long bulk of the shipyard now rusted grey, broken by a tattered blue line that stretched the length of the building. It crouched on the far bank of the bay, its position a testament to its former life as a hub of maritime shipbuilding. There was a flicker of white near one of its corners, a snowdrift when I peered closer. I looked over at Mira to see if she had noticed anything, and found her staring straight ahead, eyes fixed intently on the road, her knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"You alright?" I asked quietly.

A muscle jumped in her jaw. "I'm fine," she replied tightly, "this place just brings back bad memories."

"The person you lost," I guessed.

"Who was *taken*," she corrected, grip tightening further. "She — Wren was my mentor, took me in when I first came to the base. We were on this same supply run when they took her. It was years ago, before we knew how the Infected operated in the city. She protected me then, put up enough of a fight that they didn't notice me even though I was almost close enough to touch." Mira swallowed, voice ragged. "Then she just… *dropped*, and they dragged her away."

"I'm sorry," I said, wincing at the inadequacy of the words.

"I'll do better this time," she continued, like she hadn't heard me, like she was talking to someone else. "Won't let my guard down, won't lose *anyone else*."

"Mira —"

"We're here," she interrupted, pulling out the key with a twist of her wrist. The dashboard lights flickered out, taking the music with them.

I looked up and was met with the looming grey broadside of the shipyard. Its exterior was in much worse shape close up, more rust than paint, especially around the small access door beside us, but the structure itself seemed sturdy enough.

Mira pulled on her respirator mask and thick leather work gloves and cracked open the cab door. A wash of warm air rolled in, carrying the scent of the sea and old tar with it.

We froze in the warmth, staring at each other with wide eyes.

"What should we do?" I asked, imagined humidity sticky against my skin and the scent of antiseptic burning my nose.

What I could see of Mira's face locked down, perfectly flat and hard, a shell. "We get the job done and get out as quickly as possible."

I nodded, steeling myself, and opened my door. I stepped out onto the pitted pavement, moving aside so she could grab her toolbox. Its contents clinked together with the movement, the faint sound seeming to magnify, echoing against our surroundings.

Mira slung the toolbox carrying strap over her shoulder before withdrawing a small pair of bolt cutters from its depths.

She studied the thick padlock holding the access door shut for a second, then, hefting the bolt cutters, snipped through the lock's shank with one decisive motion. I caught the severed lock before it could hit the ground and placed it carefully to the side.

Mira re-stowed the bolt cutters and pulled open the door. It shuddered, screeching on its rusted hinges, but gave way enough for us to slip inside.

It was pitch black in the building, air cold but warming quickly and stinking of old oil and degraded rubber. Mira followed me in, flicking on her flashlight as soon as she was through. The luminous beam showed what looked to be a tangle of rusted-out assembly lines, all leading towards a massive open space marked with the corroded remains of what might once have been a ship, and further on, a massive roll-up door at least four stories tall leading outside.

Mira hesitated a moment, as if pulling up a mental map, before leading the way deeper into the factory.

"We're looking for the electronics storage room," Mira whispered, voice muffled through the mask.

"Do you remember where it is?" I asked, hushed.

"Not precisely," Mira admitted, "but it's towards the back of the building."

"Lead the way, then. I'll watch your back."

She nodded and led us deeper into the complex, light bobbing with every step.

We made our way out of the assembly room and into the looming void of the supplies warehouse. These were all static components — support beams, hull plating, and wing struts, among others. Part of the roof had given way at some point, exposing the room to the humid, salt-heavy air, destroying everything inside.

We kept going.

Eventually, near the very back of the maze-like hallways, we found a much smaller room labelled **ASTRO-NAV COMP. STORAGE.** Mira slipped inside first, pulling a padded collapsible backpack from her supplies while searching down the crowded shelves that filled the room.

I watched her for a moment, lingering near the door. Satisfied she had it well in hand, I let my eyes unfocus, all attention now turned to what I could hear, what I could feel.

There was a shuffling, skittering *something* at the very edge of my awareness that hadn't been there before — no, scratch that. ***M*any** *somethings*. A flock, a pack, *a hunting party*.

They grew louder, inextricably closer, presence shifting to an ever-nearing *hum*. It scoured through me, at once a bone-sharp fracture and drawn-close web, and either way debilitating. *Redmind.*

"Mira," I hissed. "*Mira, they're* **here.**"

"*Shit*," Mira bit out from the depths of the stacks. There was a faint rustle of metal against cloth, then — "I have the Nav Comp. Let's go."

"Are there any exits at this end of the building?" I asked as she rejoined me near the door, the piece we risked so much for safely tucked away in the pack on Mira's back.

"No," she replied, breathlessly, "this section was meant to be secure. How many Infected are there, where, how close?"

I breathed through the tightness in my chest, listening, trying to focus.

"At least a dozen, maybe more. I think they're still in the assembly area, headed this way, moving fast."

"Alright," Mira muttered, cinching a pack strap tighter, "alright. We just need to get back to the truck, get as far from here as possible. If

we can avoid getting cornered back here, we should be able to slip past them."

I nodded, the gesture tugging uncomfortably at my tensed-hard neck and shoulders. The hum grew louder, implacable and all-consuming.

"I remember the path back. Can you keep track of them at this range?" Mira asked, dragging my attention back.

"Yes," I breathed, the humming beginning to solidify into words, to crisp intent. I could feel a cold spot, a sharp-edged icy presence, Redmind, shredding my perception in her wake, the smaller white-capped whirlpools of her followers swirling in her eddies. "Yes, I can, and we need to move *now*."

We fled through the twisting hallways, hearts pounding the same staccato as our feet.

Redmind was still gaining, still seeking, her followers spreading out and closing around us like a fishing net.

They caught us steps into the assembly hall.

There was a low shiver of sound behind us, the grating of metal against metal, another closer. We exchanged a look, scrambling over the bulk of an assembly line to hide in its opposing curve, but it was too late.

They stepped into the open, both sharp-edged cacophony and utter silence. Her men surrounded us, white crests almost glowing in the wash of Mira's flashlight. They wore armoured vests over dark tactical clothing, electric batons hanging from their belts, and dart rifles in their hands, fanning out on either side of a woman in a horrifically familiar lab coat as she emerged from the shadows.

"*You gave us quite a run, didn't you, Sami?*" Dr. Redmind cooed, gliding to the front of the group, her heeled black boots cracking against the concrete floor, her thoughts like mercury — smooth, silvery, poisonous. "*Don't worry, we're here to take you home now.*"

Her eyes were fixed on me, dark, cold, and utterly flat.

I pressed back against the jagged bulk of the machine, closer to Mira. Redmind's presence was a riptide, drowning out everything else and pulling me under.

Mira's hand closed warm around mine, and I could breathe again. I tucked closer in against her, the new vantage point revealing a gap in the assembly's bulk. I could see the door out, still open to the sunlight, beckoning.

If we could reach it, we would be free.

"*Come now, Sami,*" Redmind projected, holding out a white-nailed hand, expectant, "*don't be difficult.*"

"Run," I hissed, pulling Mira to her feet.

Mira staggered, brought up short, the band of her respirator catching on a scrap of protruding metal and pulling free of her face.

Mira coughed, pulling her coat over her mouth and nose, eyes wide and terrified. I took her free hand and ran for the door, half-dragging Mira as she stumbled along behind me.

We almost made it.

"*Shoot her,*" Redmind ordered, thought snapping out like a whip.

Her guards raised their rifles and shot in an instant.

I pushed Mira out ahead of me, through the door, *free*, silvered dart meant for her sparking against the doorframe.

Clean air washed over my face, a breath away. Mira was slumped against the truck, but that was alright, she was *free*, we would be —

A dart punched into my back, right between my shoulder blades, driving the breath from my lungs. The sunlight faded like I had been plunged into deep water.

Ice sealed over my head.

And the world went away.

Chapter Seven

Ouroboros

I woke.

Rubble-strewn asphalt swayed sickeningly in my vision, my own numb hands hanging past my face, jerking unevenly with every impact.

I kicked out weakly, felt my legs connect with the armoured vest of the guard carrying me slung over his shoulder.

He stopped, calling something to the others, but my head was buzzing too loudly to make out his words.

No! No, not again, please. Mira, she was free, she got out — but her mask was off. Did they get her, too?

I craned my neck, trying to catch a glimpse of her, praying that I wouldn't.

She was nowhere in sight, and I let out a breath.

There was a hum of voices. A pair of oil-slick black heeled boots stepped into view.

Redmind tipped my face up, forcing me to look at her — her face something unnaturally empty, flesh drawn over steel, her pale eyes the only thing that seemed alive, shining with a cold gleam like fluorescent lights.

"*There you are, Sami,*" she said, though her mouth didn't move, words rotting with a sweetness that didn't reach her eyes. "*We were getting worried.*"

"Fuck you," I snarled, voice wrecked but at least my own.

She smiled, lips stretching grotesquely at the thin-scaled plating at

the edges of her face, her teeth bleached as bone.

Cold metal pressed against my side, and with a crackle of electricity, the world went dark.

I woke again, sometime later, staring up at the plasterboard ceiling of my cell. I blinked, the room blurring with the splitting pain in my head.

Gritting my teeth, I sat up, the sterile white, fluorescent lights above me flickering at the effort.

The long plastic tube tugged at my flesh where the IV was buried in the crook of my left elbow. I ripped the tube out, uncaring of the blood that followed, and shoved it away from me, its spindly stand following to clatter against the far wall. I was still dressed in the clothes Mira had given me, one sleeve sheared away to make room for the IV.

There were voices in the hall. Muted mental chatter. The footsteps of someone in heels.

I will not do this again.

My mind cleared a little. Noticing the blood for the first time, I ripped a ragged strip of fabric from the thin sheets of the bed and bound my arm firmly, flexing my fingers.

The footsteps stopped outside the door. A murmur of voices, the rattle of keys on a crowded ring.

Redmind.

I stood, disjointed, but steadying, *hardening*, and glanced around the cramped room for a weapon.

I focused on the IV, blood and clear fluid still dripping from where I ripped myself free.

Perfect.

The clink of metal on metal. A key settling into the lock.

I disconnected the tubing and wrapped either end around my hands.

I grinned, teeth bared and thought to be sharp.

Click.

Chapter Eight

Shattered

I pressed my back to the wall beside the door as it swung open with an echoing groan.

"*Where is she?*" Redmind demanded, cold and tasting of metal in the back of my throat.

One of the guards stuck his head in and, when he didn't see me, stepped inside.

I leapt for him, wrapping the tubing around his exposed neck, drawing it taut as I clung to his back. He gagged, fingers clawing at his throat as he stumbled further into the cell.

"*Take her out,*" Redmind ordered from the hallway.

I dug my knee savagely into the small of his back, forcing my captive between me and his comrade, and heard him grunt as a shining dart buried itself in the unarmoured gap between his vest and belt.

I felt him go limp and dropped him, discarding the tubing in favour of the electrified baton he'd carried at his hip.

I ignited it, revelling in the electricity arcing across its blunt metallic tip. I turned towards the second guard, lips stretching back from my teeth.

He was fumbling with his gun, trying and failing to load another dart.

Redmind shouted something, but I didn't care.

I was on the guard in a second, ramming the head of the baton into the seam of soft flesh just below his ribs, his fingers spasming uncontrollably where he had reached too late for his own weapon.

His body slumped to the floor, unconscious, still twitching with residual shocks.

Redmind had disappeared, the crack of her heels retreating hastily down the hall.

I listened to her go, my mind gone cold and calm as a frozen ocean, raging underneath.

Running wouldn't help her.

I dragged the second guard into the cell, locked them in, and went on the hunt.

I stalked through the deserted hallways, not even flinching when the lights switched to a deep, glaring red, an alarm echoing in the distance. More footsteps, these the heavy boots of the guards, converging from both sides.

The cells lining the hallway were silent, I realized, empty. Their former occupants either infected or dead.

It wasn't enough to escape, I thought, *this place needs to* **burn***, nothing left to rebuild.*

There was a shout behind me, footsteps ever louder, ever closer.

I bared my teeth, the baton a verdant buzz in my hand that cut through the ever-present hum like a knife.

A squad of guards rounded the corner nearest to me, and I was on them before they could react. Electricity crackled through their bodies, leaving them limp and their clothes smoking faintly.

More guards joined the fray, close quarters making their guns useless. They fumbled with their own batons, struggling not to hit each other, unused to their victims fighting back.

One got in a lucky shot, his baton grazing past my shoulder, the electricity buckling my spine and stealing my breath for one terrifying moment.

It left me shaking, even as it passed, even as I swung my baton like a bat, slipping just below the edge of his vest and deep into his gut.

He slumped, eyes glazed, to the floor, and suddenly it was quiet. I flicked off the electricity flowing through the baton, my hand and arm

still buzzing with its phantom power.

I stalked the hallways for endless minutes, the light catching unevenly at my eyes in the reflections I passed, something broken in the cut of my jaw and the set of my skin.

I looked away.

I found the labs eventually, close to the core of the complex, no little cells here, just offices, labs, and Redmind's living area.

The harsh white lights of Redmind's lab were out for once, but it didn't matter; I could recognize it by smell alone — the acrid scent of antiseptic and old blood.

I tried the doorknob. It turned, but the door wouldn't open. I threw my shoulder against it again and *again*, not even feeling the impact, relishing each small give of the door, until it sagged, listing inwards, and I walked through the breach.

I lit the baton, the arcs casting a dim silvery purple light around the room, shining dully off medical equipment, the lab benches, and the crowded filing cabinets, off beakers of cleaning solutions and infectious serums alike.

There was a sound from the far corner of the room, some small intake of breath, the muted rattle of keys on a crowded ring.

"I know you're here, Redmind," I growled, taking a pace towards her dark little corner, baton humming an urgent pitch at my side. "You can't run anymore, not from me, not from what you've done."

She stood, her eyes glinting silver in the low light. "*All I've done is for the greater good, you must see that, Sami. Don't let your silly little emotions distract you from that fact. You and my other…* **subjects** *are simply doing your part for a brighter future.*" Her eyes flashed, gaze distant, obsessed. "*Once you…* **outliers** *join our fold, we will all be as* **one**." She stepped closer, hand outstretched to take the baton, her voice smooth, coaxing. "*Don't you want to be* **free***, Sami? Free from all that pain and loss and strife I can see in you? Come back and we will be great again, united,* **singular** *in mind and body. We will be* **safe** *at last.*"

I spoke, tongue tasting of barbed wire. "There is no *safety* here. Your *subjects* were stolen from their homes and families, from any sense of past or place. You have *killed* them, all of them, or worse — made them one of you. All of them, except for me, because I *escaped*,

because *I* can see outside your *vision*, because I put up a *fight*."

I took a breath, felt the ache of my body with every drawn-taut movement, eyes coming to rest on a large beaker of rubbing alcohol.

"You say you are strong here," I spat, thumbing the baton's power to its highest setting, feeling its urgent pulse deep in my chest, "but you are only the *same*. And *that* is a **weakness**."

I jabbed the baton through the beaker, shattering the glass. Electricity lit the alcohol in an instant, blooming into a burst of heat and blue flame that sent me stumbling back into the hallway.

I fell to the floor, face and arms reddened with the heat of it, burn blisters already forming across my knuckles. Hands grabbed at me, dragged me, and I struggled against them, ears ringing and breath gone.

They let go, and I scrambled to my feet, lit baton still tight in my grasp and ready to swing, and lost my breath all over again when I saw Mira.

She was here, a little bloody and coated with enough grime to look like she'd crawled through an air shaft, but *here* and *alive*, and that was all I needed.

With a laugh of giddy, breathless *relief,* I swept her into a hug, her arms closing around me as I buried my face in her shoulder for a long moment, my baton dropping to the floor.

Something buckled in the lab, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass and groaning, overheated metal.

I turned back to the lab, keeping my body between it and Mira.

Redmind stood hunched over her filing cabinet on the other side of the flames, stuffing papers and folders into a satchel. Her silver eyes seemed to glow in the firelight as it shifted from blue to orange, as the room itself caught flame.

I saw a small gap in the fire between us, a narrow alley along the far right wall, but the flames were licking hungrily towards it.

I watched her, through the fire, watched her unnatural eyes find the gap.

She turned away, drawn back to the cabinet.

She was still there a few breaths later when, with a sharp crack of shattering glass and the hissing wash of a newly added accelerant, the fire fully engulfed the room in impenetrable flame.

The fire was spreading, licking out towards us, but the hall was dim, greyed out around the edge of my vision. I couldn't hear her anymore. The world was cacophonous, but I could still pick out the silence she had once filled. She was gone, and I was *free*.

Mira was tugging at me, pulling me away from the soon-to-be burned-out room and hungry flame. She was saying something, her lips moving, her words soundless in the ringing silence of the warm grey snowfall inside my head.

Her eyes met mine, held them. “Soren,” her lips said.

And the world came back.

Chapter Nine

Daybreak

Mira pulled me farther down the hall and around a corner, the air a little cleaner here, away from the flame and choking smoke that was now pouring out into the hallway.

"Are you hurt?" she half-shouted over the roar of the fire, pulling her bandanna from her hair and reaching out to secure it over my face.

I shook my head, reaching out to still her hand, to feel the rapid flutter of her pulse in her wrist. "How are you *here*?"

She shrugged, pulling away from my hands. "I guess I'm immune. We — "

"*Why* are you here?" I cut her off desperately. "You were *free*, you could have left, you could have gone *home*, been *safe*. Why would you put yourself in danger for someone you met two days ago?"

She held my gaze and steadied my shaking hands. "Because we're stronger together. Because I will *not* let this be another tragedy. Besides," she said with the barest hint of a smile, "we had a deal."

I stared at her for a long moment as she tied her bandanna over my mouth and nose. The fabric was soft, body-warm, and thick enough to block out the worst of the smoke's acrid bite.

Something broke under the strain of the fire, crashing to the ground with enough force to shake the whole building and send a geyser of smoke rocketing into our section of hallway, destroying our momentary sanctuary.

Mira pulled the collar of her coat over her own face, muffling her words. "We have to go! Is there anything you need here, anyone else we can save?"

I shook my head, grabbed hold of her free hand. "Nothing left here. Follow me!"

I led the way through the twisting hallways, once-white walls now stained with soot and ash. We didn't see anyone, but I could hear the remainders, the hum of their thoughts far off and panicked.

Soon, there would be nothing left of this place. I could be free with Mira, the possibility shining, almost close enough to touch. The burning of this lab wouldn't stop the rest of the Infected in the city, but if we could make it to the moon base, to Luna One, we would be untouchable.

Redmind's vision of safety had been one of uniform stagnation, the slow withering fossilization of status quo until there was nothing left but inert dust. But Luna One was a chance for a different kind of safety, one born of a diverse and ever-blooming *change*.

We ran through a last set of doors and out into the cold night air. Mira took the lead now, pulling me further, past the lab's fences and retaining walls to the open space beyond. It was bright even here, the lab's pyre a dawn of our own making. We watched as smoke roiled into the low-lit sky, as gouts of flame spilled from broken windows and doors. With a final resounding *crack*, the lab fell in a plume of sparks and a whipping wash of heat.

A handful of white-crested figures fled the scene, heading away from us and towards the inner city. There was nothing left for them here and they knew it.

Mira nudged me in the direction of her truck, and I followed, casting one last look back at the smoldering ruins.

Redmind was *gone*. It felt strange, that silence, that newly opened ground she had once occupied. I wondered what I could plant there.

Mira had turned to watch me. In the dying light she offered out a hand, stained with soot and grime, and callused with years of work.

I took her hand in mine, all warm skin and mingled scars, and began anew.

ACT TWO

Echoes

Chapter One

Plunge

The ship rumbled under my feet as it prepared for takeoff.

I breathed carefully around the harness securing me to my seat in the corner of the cockpit, watching Quinn as he did his final checks for launch. Mira was down in the engineering room, ready in case anything needed tending to once we reached orbit.

Mark, our chemist, looked over at me from his seat against the other wall, flashing me a thumbs up and a grin when I met his gaze. I gave him a tight smile in return and refocused on Quinn's movements.

The intercom crackled, hissed, and finally resolved into Mira's voice, sharp with tension. "All systems green here. Ready to fire primary thrusters on your mark."

Quinn held down a button on his console. "Copy. All checks complete. Strap in for take-off."

"Roger," Mira replied, and the intercom shut off with a sharp pop.

Quinn flicked a switch, opening a line to ground control. "Ready to depart, Ground."

"Copy, *Artemis*," came the reply, "smooth sailing and safe returns."

"Copy."

Quinn glanced back at Mark and me. "All secure?"

I nodded back and wrapped my hands around my harness, trying to breathe deeply as I stared out the front viewscreen, early March sunlight pouring in as the hangar doors opened.

It had been almost four months since I'd come to Demeter Base with Mira. It had been an adjustment, but I was doing better now, ribs not

quite so visible, and even the worst of my cuts and scrapes long healed. Some marks remained: the burn scars across my knuckles that ached sometimes when it rained, the bands of fresh shiny skin around my wrists, the thin strands of white twisting out from my left elbow that could never be removed, the nightmares that still plagued my sleep. I could still hear the voices of the Infected when they were close enough, that's why I was here — to provide an early warning system against any Infected that might be lingering in the depths of Luna 1. This would only be a scouting mission, a first foray out to the lunar base to ensure it's habitably before transporting the rest of Demeter's inhabitants.

The ship lurched and began to taxi towards the runway, and we emerged fully into the dawn light.

A high, grating wine sounded as Quinn tested the flaps on the wings, then, apparently satisfied, took a breath, settled into his seat, and grabbed hold of the steering yoke. "Here we go," he breathed, almost to himself.

He flicked a switch, and the engines revved louder, the deck vibrating faintly under my feet, and for a moment, I wished I were down in the engine room with Mira so I could watch her back, though I knew she could take care of herself.

That thought was swept away as the ship accelerated suddenly, pressing me back into my seat and squeezing the breath from my lungs for a moment.

The superstructure groaned as we left the ground, shaking enough to rattle my teeth with the force of it.

The sky outside faded from the pale tint of dawn to an impossibly deep navy blue, the sun rising with us, the edge blurring slightly around the curve of the earth. The sky desaturated fully and bloomed with stars, the Milky Way glittering ahead of us. I wished Mira was here to see these first fruits of her labour, the years of work all culminating in this one event. She had put her life on the line to complete this ship, spent long hours in the hangar with her crew to complete it before spring came, and now we were here. Now we were *free*.

Well.

Almost.

The moon came into view, still distant — it would take almost a full day to reach it at our speed — but suddenly within reach.

The shaking lessened, then fell off completely as we sailed fully into the void.

Quinn let out a breath and opened the intercom channel. "Stable orbit achieved, any problems during lift off?"

"No major problems," came Mira's distorted voice, wavering with some combination of tension, relief, and exhaustion. "A segment of the coolant system was damaged. Shouldn't take long to fix."

"Roger. Report back when it's repaired. Good work," Quinn replied and shut off the comm.

"You can unbuckle now," he said over his shoulder, addressing both of us. "Mark, check the cargo bays to make sure all your equipment survived lift-off. Soren, check the bunk rooms. Oh, and be careful walking around, the grav plating can be temperamental when it first starts up."

"Yes, Sir!" Mark replied with a jaunty salute, already free of his restraints and bouncing to his feet, excitement radiating off him.

I tugged the harness restraints slack and unbuckled, trying to roll some of the tension loose from my shoulders as I stood.

Quinn was already bent over the clipboard propped against his bent leg and held by the foreshortened remains of his left arm, double-checking the dials' readings and preparing to program the Nav system. He'd been an extra-planetary pilot during the war, Mira had told me, the youngest of his squadron and the only one to survive. He'd been like a ghost haunting the Demeter Base when she'd first arrived, driven by a memory of routine and flinching at sudden movements. He'd recovered, mostly, in the years that followed, now the only person left for hundreds of kilometers capable of flying one of these ships. *What will he do*, I wondered, *when there are no more ships to fly?*

I shook my head. *Focus on the here and now.* I left, stepping carefully over the raised lip of the doorframe. Mark followed me out into the narrow hallway, closing the door behind us.

"You going to check on Mira?" he asked after a few moments.

"After I finish with the cabins," I replied, half-twisting to be able to

see him as I walked. "Why? Did you need something?"

He shook his head. "You two've been spending a lot of time together lately. I'm not sure she would've come on this trip if you'd decided to stay behind," Mark teased, his tone warm and laced with implications.

It was an exaggeration, of course. He and I both knew Mira better than to think she might actually abandon the ship in a time of need, but his point still stood. Mira and I had spent a lot of time together, had gotten… close.

I tried (and failed) to ignore the blush blooming on my cheeks and crawling up the tips of my ears. "She's… very important to me."

Mark chuckled behind me. "Well, you're good together, I think. These past few months would have been a lot harder on her if you weren't around." He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Oop! There's my exit! See you later!" He headed down another hall towards the hold. "Have fun!" he called over his shoulder.

I stared after him for a moment, warmth burning across my face and curling fondly in my chest.

I checked over the four crew cabins on my way to the engine room, Mark and Quinn's slotted in near the front of the ship, mine a cramped cubby of a reformed supply closet in the middle and just up the hall from where Mira's was snugged alongside the engine room. They were singularly tiny, just enough room for a narrow bed, supply locker, and about half a square meter of floor space. None of them had taken any damage.

The door of the engine room was more of a vertical hatch than anything else, curved and surrounded by reinforced steel, with its opening beginning a half-step above the floor and rimmed in caution tape. It was designed to protect the engine in case of decompression, so it operated on its own life support system and could be completely sealed off from the rest of the ship. I cranked a handle that looked to be from an old submarine to open the hatch and was greeted by a wash of warm air smelling of engine grease and ozone as I stepped through. Careful to close the door behind me, I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the orange-tinted lights.

"Mira?" I called softly.

There was an echoing clang from somewhere in the compact tangle of the engine, rustling, a quiet curse, and finally Mira emerged, like

Aphrodite from the sea, haloed by the dim lights that thought themselves suns. Her face was smeared with grease, a camouflage pattern that continued down her jumpsuit and slicked her hair where it wasn't covered by her bandanna; she was in her element and almost *glowing* with it.

As she came closer, the toll this project had taken on her showed more clearly. There were bags under her eyes, a near-permanent crease between her brows, nicks and scattered bruises marring what I could see of her arms. She seemed to sway on her feet every so slightly, like she was riding the swells of an unseen ocean.

I clasped a hand on Mira's shoulder to steady her as soon as she was within reach, and she smiled faintly, leaning into the touch.

"You want a hand with anything?" I asked quietly.

"If you have time," she said, straightening to rub a hand over her brow and leaving a dark smear behind, "the coolant tubing — it's not so much *damaged* as it is *semi-melted*. I've already taken off the damaged piece, but if you could hold the replacement coil in place from the bottom while I secure it up top, that'd be a great help."

"I'm all yours," I said, "however I can be of assistance."

She grinned briefly and led the way into the maze-like bulk of the engine room.

"Luckily, it didn't degrade completely," she explained while we walked, "just enough to make the coolant system a bit less efficient, so we're going to replace it with a sturdier spare before we go into the second stage of the burn. The other good news is that only this small section melted. The coolant system coils right around the fusion chamber, so replacing the whole thing would have been a pain in the —"

She was interrupted by Quinn's voice crackling to life over the comm. "Oriented for secondary burn, what's the repair status?"

"Shit," Mira muttered, fumbling for the walkie-talkie stashed in one of her many pockets as she ducked under a protruding pipe. She pulled it free and held down the 'talk' button. "Repairs underway. Just about to install the replacement component now, shouldn't take more than ten minutes." She released the button and waited for a reply, ear tuned to the comms' static-flecked silence.

"Roger," came Quinn's reply a moment later. "Report back when operational."

The comm shut off with a sharp pop.

Mira sighed out a breath.

"Come on," she said, "let's get this finished."

The job went quickly between the two of us. I held one end of the tubing as Mira arced it over the core of the engine, attached it to the undamaged section on the other side, before shuffling carefully backward to anchor it in place every few hand-spans.

It was dim in the tangle of machinery, cramped, warm, and a little humid with the spilled coolant. Some piece of equipment hummed off to my right, the sound layering onto itself until it seemed a physical weight pressing across my shoulders. Mira shifted above me, her form mostly obscured by the jungle of pipes and looping conduits trailing from the ceiling. The crook of my left elbow ached, hands growing slick with sweat around my end of the tubing. Shadows twisted at the edge of my vision, reaching for me.

I let my head fall back to rest against the equipment along the wall behind me, eyes slipping shut.

I'd known this was a possibility — that being on the ship would remind me of my time at the lab. I'd been prepared for it to catch at my mind and body, to reopen old wounds. I hadn't been prepared for the twisted *nostalgia* of it. My time at the lab had been horrific, I knew that, and I didn't want to go back. But at the same time, I had been some modicum of safe there, my future and every moment leading up to it carefully wrested from my control. There, I had only needed to worry about *surviving*.

And now I was free.

Now I had to learn how to *live*.

There was a muffled metallic *clang* above me, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Alright," Mira called, voice echoing tinny, "that should do it for up here. Keep the tension on the line until I get down to connect it."

I adjusted my grip on the tubing. "Got it."

~

A few minutes later, I stood off to the side, stretching out my hands as Mira tightened down the last bolt. She stepped back, surveying the work with a keen eye.

Nodding to herself, she pulled a stained rag from one of her pockets and wiped her hands before grabbing the walkie-talkie.

"Repairs complete," she reported, "clear for secondary burn."

"Copy," Quinn replied, "brace for acceleration."

I held on to a grab-handle protruding from the wall beside me while Mira simply pressed her forehead to the side of the engine, her lips moving in silent prayer.

The ship lurched under me, and I swayed with it, riding along with its currents of force for the few moments before it evened out to nothing.

The engines hummed in flight like a beehive, the many individual components moving together in an intricate dance. The sound seemed to soothe Mira, to ease the drop and roll of her shoulders as her eyes fluttered open.

For a moment, I could see her, the *real* her beneath the weights of legacy and responsibility that hung so heavy from her.

She had nearly worked herself to exhaustion to get the ship ready to fly before spring came — before the remaining Infected made it too dangerous to leave the base. But she *loved* her work, loved its beauty, its complexity, its capacity to keep the people she cared about safe.

She turned from the engine, finally, weary eyes finding mine.

She smiled, bright and warm as the sun itself.

"Thanks for the help," she said, ambling over to lean against the wall beside me.

"Of course," I murmured.

She reached out and brushed her thumb fondly across my cheek, hand sliding back to smooth down my short-cropped hair as I leaned into her touch.

We drew apart abruptly as the comm crackled on overhead in stereo with Mira's radio, Quinn requesting a crew meeting in the cockpit.

Mira sighed and held out her arm like a gentleman of eras past. "Shall we?"

"We shall," I replied with an exaggerated curtsy. I hooked my arm through hers and we headed for the cockpit.

Chapter Two

Pursuit

Our other two crew members were waiting for us when we arrived. Quinn had half-turned the pilot's seat around to face the rest of the room and was slightly slumped in it, the most relaxed I'd seen him since the launch. He straightened up when he saw us come in, while Mark just draped himself further over the back of the still front-facing copilot's chair, alternating between watching space slide past the windows and sharing his observations with Quinn. He smiled at us, settling more fully into his seat.

I slid into the furthest of the two remaining seats anchored to the back wall. Mira followed, almost missing hers, transfixed by the glow of the ripe-fruited moon hanging out amongst the black.

"Right then," Quinn said, shifting a little in his seat, "let's begin with the launch report. According to the instruments here, the launch went relatively smoothly, no pressure lost from the cabin, and life support, including temperature control, is stable. Positioning and burn for Lunar intercept was successful, and the Nav computer has taken over course maintenance and speed." He grabbed a clipboard with a pen attached from where it was perched atop a nearby console and settled it against his bent knee. "Did you have anything to add, Mira?"

Mira startled at the sound of her name, tearing her attention back to Quinn.

"Yes, sorry." Her gaze unfocused slightly, landing somewhere a little left of Quinn's shoulder like she was reading from a mental logbook. "Fuel consumption was within expected limits for the primary burn, looks to be the same for secondary. The heat of the engine during launch partially melted a section of coolant tubing, but I was able to replace it with little coolant lost. Otherwise, no problems."

Quinn nodded, writing as she spoke. "Good work," he said when she finished, and checked something off on his clipboard. "Mark, what's the condition of the cargo bays?"

Mark slouched more comfortably into his seat before responding. "Cargo Bay 2 is secure, all the supplies are still strapped down and undamaged, as is the water tank. Bay 1 is also in good shape. I ran a quick diagnostic on the airlock and life support systems and didn't find any problems."

Quinn jotted that down, did another check, and turned his gaze to me.

"The cabins are secure and habitable," I reported, "no problems."

Quinn made a note, checked a box, and set the clipboard aside. Some of the steel went out of his spine as he scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Alright," he said, standing with a loud crack of his knees. "Mark and I will take the first sleep shift and relieve you two at 1600 hours as planned."

I nodded in acquiescence, nudging Mira when she didn't respond, too transfixed by the view.

"Hhm?" Mira blinked. "Right, yes, we'll see you in six hours."

Quinn nodded to himself, hovering on the brink of the doorway with Mark close behind. "And you'll wake me if there's a problem?" he asked, half order, half plea.

"We will, don't worry," Mira soothed. "Get some rest."

Apparently satisfied, Quinn finally allowed Mark to herd him out into the hallway. Mark shot a smile at me and winked at Mira, who rolled her eyes good-naturedly and shooed him from the room.

Mark left, shutting the door behind him, leaving us in an echoing silence.

Mira let out a long breath, slumping a little in her seat.

When I looked over at her, her eyes were closed, long lashes fanning shadows across her cheeks. I watched as she breathed, as the world turned far behind us, as the void broke against our plying bow, broke and remade, and…

"I suppose we had better get to work," Mira said, shifting with a wince to sit more upright. "Did Quinn mention anything earlier that

might need to be fixed?"

I frowned, thought for a moment. "No. Everything here held up well."

Mira hummed to herself and stood, heavy steel-toed boots thudding against the decking as she walked over to the main console where Quinn had left his report clipboard. She scooped it up and scanned down the page, a crease forming between her eyebrows as she flipped to the next, fingers leaving a smudge of grease behind.

She huffed out a breath and set the board back down where she found it. The bent page unfurled slowly, the slightest rasp of friction holding it curled until it passed some invisible threshold and collapsed fully to lay almost, but not quite flat. The grease mark remained, garish against the white, semi-translucent around the edges, and yet implacable.

Mira ran a hand through her hair, a motion made mostly futile by her bandanna, and leaned over the control console, hands braced in the small gaps of bare metal amongst the riot of instrumentation. She shifted, fingers tracing the chrome settings of the dials before coming to rest atop the Nav computer.

She lingered there a long moment, short nails following the grooves of the device.

She moved strangely, shuddering along from one motion to the next like there was some misfire between her brain and body, like she didn't know what she was looking for, like she didn't know how to *stop* looking.

Her eyes darted up to the windows, to where the moon hung heavy against the star-speckled black. She looked away just as quickly, blank gaze locked to the Nav computer's controls.

"Hey," I said, finally breaking the static silence, "wanna get some food?"

Mira jolted as if waking from a dream. She blinked and looked over at me.

"What?"

I stood, held out a hand like an invitation. "Do you want to get some food with me?"

Mira hesitated for a moment, staring like she couldn't quite comprehend the question. She reached out, slowly, like a flower opening to the sun, and rested her cool hand on mine.

"Alright," she said, a little dazed and eyes flickering with something like relief.

~

Mira came back to herself a little on the walk down to Cargo Bay 2, though her eyes still caught sometimes on the beads of welded seams and the hairsbreadth misalignment of decking panels.

"You want to talk about it?" I asked as we wove through the bay's expansive supply racks, hands interlinked against the chill.

She sighed out a long breath, steam curling from her lips.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "I'm just tired, I think. I feel like I'm being haunted by mistakes I haven't made yet. I'm waiting for something to go wrong and praying I'll be able to hold the ship together long enough when it does. All it would take is one loose bolt, one imbalance in the fuel mixture, one tripped breaker for all of this to fall apart."

We stopped in front of the food storage section. Two small shelves stood tucked away in the back of the cargo bay, loaded with the heavy metal boxes that together held a week's worth of food.

"We'll make it," I promised despite myself. "And if something *does* happen, we'll figure it out together. We just need to do what we can —"

"Do you think we'll ever get to *rest*?" Mira interrupted.

There was a long pause. I blew out a breath.

"I don't know," I replied honestly, "but I hope so."

I cracked open the first crate.

"What do you want to eat?"

~

We heated our food, filled our canteens from the water tank, and pulled sleeves over our hands to protect them from the hot dishes.

We sat together in the back seats of the cockpit.

We sat together and waited for our ghost to come, limbs pressed up against each other wherever they could reach between our seats. Mira had dug out an ancient CD player and a small collection of mixtape CDs while the food had heated. It sat propped in the corner with the volume turned down low. The song playing now was slow with a strange mix of a steady rolling beat, synth, and harp.

I pulled my knees up to sit cross-legged in my seat while Mira cradled her rehydrated stew with one hand, her spoon weaving slow paths through its contents.

I blew on my portion of stew. It was the same kind Mira had shared with me when we first met, their 'winter ration', as she called it, the easiest, tastiest way to make use of the ingredients available through the colder months.

"What do you think it'll be like?" Mira asked, question punctuated with the faint *clink* of metal on glass as her spoon drooped to rest against the rim of her bowl.

"Once we've cleaned it up and everyone's moved in?"

"Yeah."

I thought for a moment. "I think it'll be quiet. Green and lush in the surface gardens, cooler in the tunnels with just enough humidity that you can taste the minerals in the air."

Mira tipped her head back against the cushions, eyes closed like she was trying to imagine it.

"I think," I continued, "we'll have space there, to play, to eat, to rest." I swallowed. "Space enough to *live*. Whatever that looks like."

"I've memorized all the blueprints we have of it," Mira murmured, "but I could never quite picture it." She reached up, arm unfolding joint by joint up through her fingers. "I know the shape of it," she continued, tracing an outline in the air, "but I can't see myself there, can't know how it'll *feel*." She closed her hand around nothing and let it fall to her chest.

I set my food aside and shifted in my seat until I was curled on my side, facing her.

"How do you *want* it to feel?"

"I…" She swallowed. "I want it to feel *known*. Like I can step away without everything falling apart. Like I can make something because I *want* to, not because people will die if I don't."

"What would you make?" I asked.

"I do like working with metal," she replied softly. "It's resilient and flexible at the same time — as long as you treat it right. I want to make small things, bowls and cups, maybe jewellery. I have a notebook, back at Demeter, where I keep ideas for pieces. Don't know if it'll come to anything but — " She broke off with a shrug, fingers flexing around the collar of her jumpsuit.

"I look forward to seeing them."

Mira smiled and opened her eyes, turning in her seat to mirror my position like an enclosed pair of parentheses.

"What will you do once we're settled in?" she asked, awash in the moonlight.

"Hmm?" I replied, distracted by the way the pale light picked up the hints of copper in her warm brown hair and cast her eyes dichromatic.

"What do you want your future to look like?"

I had thought about it in the intervening months between coming to the Demeter Base and now, working through what I thought *safe* could be and trying to imagine a future far removed from Redmind's *ideals*. It had been around the beginning of month two that Mira had suggested I try my hand in the base's garden, more for something to do than anything else. Being winter, there weren't any crops to harvest yet, but I'd helped prune back perennial plants to make way for new growth and prepare the soil for new plantings. It had been the first time in a long time that my body had felt wholly my own — with mud smeared up my arms and sap caught in my hair.

"I want to help in the gardens," I replied finally. "I feel *rooted* when I work with plants —"

Mira huffed a laugh at the terrible pun, reaching out a hand across the space between our seats. I took it, brushing a thumb across her scarred knuckles.

"I heard they managed to move a bunch of plants and a hive of bees up before they abandoned Luna," I continued, "all the usual staple crops — wheat, oats, rice, lots of vegetables and herbs — but they brought more exotic species too, turmeric, lemons, even a pair of *chocolate trees*. If even half of them survived, it'll be like a living seed bank up there!"

"Gods, I miss chocolate," Mira groaned, falling back in her seat and flopping an arm dramatically over her eyes. "Haven't had any in *years*, not since the southern trade routes closed off."

"I'll make you chocolate."

Mira rocketed upright, eyes going wide. "*What*?"

"If the chocolate trees are still producing, I'll make you chocolate. I can't promise it'll be good, but — "

Mira was out of her seat in an instant.

She tackled me, our still interlaced hands crushed between our bodies.

I laughed under the impact and felt her staccato breath puff against my neck in return.

"We'll share it," she insisted, breathless, twisting around in the seat until we were comfortably wedged in side by side, "enjoy it together."

"Together," I promised, speaking truth into the word.

~

We stayed like that for a long while, long enough that the song changed again, soft and defiant all at once.

I don't care if the dark is soon to arrive, just save me a place in the hungering sky. I don't mind if the dawn doesn't follow the night, I'll be safe in the place that you said was mine.

The words were familiar, an oft-played anthem, and we hummed along, rich vibration passing from one chest to the other and back again. It felt like a reclamation.

The rest of the shift passed quickly, hours ticking away with the kilometers slipping under our bow.

There was an ease to it now. We shared space, ate our re-warmed food, patrolled the ship looking for problems, and found none.

We returned to the cockpit as the last handful of minutes fell away into the night. Mira nestled against my shoulder, fighting sleep and losing badly.

I stiffened at the thud of boots coming down the hall towards us. Memories flickered behind my eyes, of sterile white rooms and the stench of antiseptic.

I released a long breath. Logically, I knew it was only Quinn and Mark returning for their shift. I was safe here, despite my body thinking otherwise.

Safe.

It was a quiet revelation, and something to process *later*.

I nudged Mira, and she stirred, blinking under the bright lights.

The cockpit door creaked open a few moments later, Quinn in the lead and looking like he'd gotten at least a little sleep. Mark followed behind him, chipper as ever.

We were on our feet by then, alert, though Mira was stifling a yawn every other breath.

"Report," Quinn ordered, voice lacking some of its brittle snap from a few hours ago.

Mira straightened further. "No problems," she said. "The engine is running smoothly, the electrical grid is sound, and navigation is on course."

Quinn nodded, tension draining from his eyes.

"Very good," he said, checking over the instruments and the Nav computers interface. "We will be arriving in approximately seven hours, at which time the whole crew will be considered on duty until the suitability of Luna 1 is determined."

Quinn's eyes flicked over to me, resting on the crook of my arm for a split second before flitting abruptly away like a startled bird.

"You're both dismissed. Get some rest. And yes," he continued before Mira could open her mouth, "I'll wake you if anything changes."

~

The hallway was cool and quiet compared to the confines of the cockpit. Our footsteps echoed, rebounding away and back again and building upon themselves with every repetition. The sound sent a chill down my spine, skin suddenly hyper-aware of every brush of cloth against it.

"Hey," Mira murmured as we arrived at the door of my formerly-a-closet cabin, "you want to sleep in my cabin tonight?"

I was relieved at the offer. Mira and I had often shared a room and sometimes a bed at the Demeter Base — when my nightmares were at their worst, it always helped to have her close by, and I had a feeling tonight (or what passed for night here) would be a turbulent one, revelations of safety or not. But she was tired, worn down from the stress of the launch and subsequent repairs. She needed rest, not being woken every few hours by whatever was haunting the recesses of my mind.

"I don't want to wake you," I said, looking away. "And I'm not sure we'd both even *fit* in your bunk."

Mira shrugged. "It's like you said — we'll figure it out," her voice soft and teasing all at once. "I'll sleep far better knowing you're nearby than I ever would alone, so really, you'd be doing *me* a favour." She bumped her hip against mine, and I swayed with her current.

"If you're sure," I relented, mirroring her growing smile, "but don't say I didn't warn you when you're woken up in a few hours with an elbow to the face."

"Oh, how will I *ever* forgive you for your actions whilst unconscious?" she riposted, slinging an arm over my shoulder and tugging me along down the hall with her.

~

"We've been on this ship less than *eight hours* and we've been together the whole time," I exclaimed in disbelief, standing at the threshold of Mira's cabin. "How can your room already be this much of a *mess*?!"

"I needed somewhere to store my tools," Mira replied innocently. "There wasn't room anywhere else."

"Where are we going to *sleep*?" I pressed, taking in the chaos.

An array of wrenches, hammers, pliers, and other assorted metal lay scattered around the cramped room, lending it a resemblance to the nest of a particularly mechanically inclined squirrel.

"There's only a few *in* the bed — "

"Mira."

"It's good for your back!"

"*Mira!*"

"Ugh, *fine*," she relented, amusement apparent in her voice as she stepped delicately into the room, "we can move them somewhere else for the night."

"*Thank you.*"

She grinned back at me over her shoulder and winked. "Anything for you."

~

A few minutes later, I stood alone in Mira's now significantly less cluttered room. Her various tools and supplies had been moved to my cabin now that I didn't need it, leaving the room still smelling vaguely of grease and metal but much more habitable than before.

The bed dipped under my weight. I had already changed into my sleep clothes — a well-worn long-sleeved shirt in a rich green and a soft pair of terracotta orange pants Mira had rejected for not having enough pockets.

I could hear the faint sound of water running from down the hall as Mira washed up. It was a comforting sound, reminding me of the waterfall at the Demeter Base as it cascaded down to the moss-rimmed pool below, kicking up spray and the sharp scent of ozone.

We were *so close*.

In less than seven hours we would know if there was a future here. The hope of it beat like bird wings, like a war drum in my chest, steady and fluttering and transformative. I felt laid bare by it, for wanting this future of green and growing things, a warm place to return to, a *together* to return to. I would fight without hesitation for

even the potential of it, *had fought*, and prayed I wouldn't have to do so again.

The safety I felt here curled around me like a blanket, an insulation against the alternative — that we would find Infected in the base, that their voices would hum through my mind, rip me from safe harbour and back out into the storm.

I pulled my thoughts away. There was no point in lingering on what was already a foregone conclusion either way. Like the weather, worrying about what might happen tomorrow would not help us today, so I turned my attention to the here and now, to the soft cloth swathing my body, the gentle give of the bed beneath me, the smell of metal, the sound of running water. We would be ok, whatever comes, because we had each other, and for now, that was enough.

Mira returned a few minutes later, hair fluffy and loose from its bandanna. She'd changed out of her jumpsuit and into a pair of flannel pajamas that likely predated both of us by at least a decade. Like most of her clothes, these had been patched or reinforced with careful stitching where they wore thin, each a testament of care and resilience in the face of entropy. She smiled when she saw me, thick woollen socks muffling her footsteps.

The bed held us both, in the end.

In the last moments between waking and sleep, I let go the past, let the heavy yoke of it fall from my shoulders, and let myself float in the now, the if, the *when*.

I filled myself up with the warmth of it, wrapped possibility like armour around us, at once both sword and shield.

And when the dream came like a beast from the jungle, I was ready.

Chapter Three

Reclamation

I lay on a hard table in a stark white room.

A bright light blinded me, pinning me under its gaze. I couldn't move, thick straps laced across my body, binding me to the table. They cut into my skin when I tried to get free.

It was sickly warm. So humid that the air had a physical presence. It smelled of antiseptic, and the medical gown was thin and clinging, and provided no protection.

There was the tell-tale ache of an IV in my left arm. I could see the bag for it now, the endless drip of cloudy white fluid.

But it *wasn't* endless. This wasn't my reality anymore and never would be again.

I breathed, took the air for myself, and made it anew. There was nothing here that could harm me anymore, not with the golden warmth wrapped around me, not unless I allowed it. I reached for it, the light, and drew it in closer, turned it to a thing with teeth and claws hidden beneath downy feathers.

The hum surrounded me here, drowned out any other sound. The edges of the room darkened with it, a sharp contrast to the white of the room and its natural conclusion. A clean white shell with rot underneath. The hum swelled, taking on a sibilant, accusatory *hiss* as it cloaked the walls, leaving me the lone eye of a hungry storm. The world echoed with noise, cold voices bitten off and crying out, and never to be answered.

But the storm couldn't touch me. It raged against the boundary of my golden shield, raged and was rebuffed. The restraints loosened, peeling away from me like husk from corn, revealing something new and sweet underneath.

A section of the living sound emerged to my right, darkness

webbing off the jagged-edged ridges of her crest, a single distorted voice resolving from the noise.

"It's good to see you, Sami," Redmind said. Her voice was flat, dead like the rest of her.

A shade and nothing more.

I sat up on the table, IV falling from me to hang inert and dripping from its pole.

"*What are you doing?* she demanded, words snapping like dry twigs underfoot. *"You belong to me. You will* **never** *be free of this place.* **There is no escape from this.**"

"I've already escaped," I said as the gold began to expand, driving back the storm. "This is nothing but an echo."

"But I am within you," she insisted, voice a death rattle, hollowed out, *"in your blood, your mind, your* **thoughts.** *I* **define** *your very existence."*

"I define *myself*." The thin gown was gone, replaced with soft-worn cloth. I stood on the table and the light rose with me, the confines of the room, the dream, strained under the force of it, cracks showing at the seams. The oily darkness was gone, driven off, *burned* off.

Redmind was left alone in the end.

"You were a scar on my past," I continued, "not my *present*. Not my *future*. *Those* I make for *myself*."

The light, the warmth, the *gold* surged from me, a final wave to break the dam, and with the soft *pop* of a soap bubble, the dream dissolved.

I woke to the dim light from the ship's hallway seeping in through the crack beneath the door.

It was quiet. Truly quiet. A living kind of quiet. Mira breathed beside me, stirred to something resembling wakefulness.

"Hey," she slurred into the silence, "you alright?"

"Yeah," I whispered with the shiver of a bone reset. "Yeah, I'm alright. Go back to sleep."

"Good," Mira grunted, and clumsily patted my shoulder before slipping back into sleep.

I smiled and felt the golden warmth curl closer as I tucked Mira's side of the blanket back into place.

I took the lingering silence into myself, wove it between my bones until it could never be pried away. It was steadying, an absolution, an ending, small stitches on the path to mending what had been worn thin.

And as I fell asleep, I had a feeling I would need the reinforcement it offered in the coming hours.

Chapter Four

Impact

I woke to a wave of sound, shrill emergency alarms blaring in stereo across the ship.

It took Mira a second to scramble from the bed, her eyes wide as she rolled to her feet.

"What's happening!?" she shouted over the noise.

"I don't — "

I was cut off by Quinn's voice crackling to life, overriding the alarm for a moment. "All crew report to the cockpit!"

Mira and I looked at each other and ran for the cockpit.

I nearly froze at the scene before me as I came through the last doorway.

"*Fuck,* that's a lot of asteroids," Mira breathed behind me.

I nodded in numb awe. What we could see of the outside was filled with a swarm of asteroids, all grey-white and ranging in size from what looked like barely a speck at this distance to one the size of a small city at the center of the cloud. And they were heading right for us.

Mira stepped around me, her shoulders a solid line.

"Incoming asteroid cluster, well over a hundred kilometers across," Quinn reported tightly, not looking away from the radar. "Moving fast, intercept in" — he glanced at another dial — "approximately ten minutes. I've changed course to try and duck under them, but it won't be enough."

"Can we go any faster? Adjust the fuel mixture for a higher velocity burn, maybe?" Mark piped up from the co-pilot seat.

Quinn glanced over at him. "Say you did, how much of a boost would that give us?"

"At least another hundred meters per second," Mark replied quickly. "Any more than that and the risk of explosion goes up exponentially."

Quinn nodded, a single sharp movement. "Mira, can you make that work?"

"Yes," she gritted out. "Yes, but it'll take me a few minutes."

"We have eight minutes until impact. Do it. We'll meet at the aux controls in the engine room when you're ready."

"Mark, with me," Mira called, turning from the looming wave of asteroids.

"Good luck," I said, offering out a hand just for a moment.

Mira let out a breath, squeezed my hand in hers before she had to let go.

"You too," she murmured, and disappeared out the door, Mark following close behind.

Quinn shook his head in a helpless little gesture, jaw clenched.

"Soren," he said raggedly, "do what you can to prepare the ship for impact, check that everything is lashed down in the cargo bays, then rendezvous in the engine room to ride out the storm."

I nodded and sprinted for the cargo bays. The alarms had turned off by now, leaving an eerie silence behind like the ship was holding its breath, the tension in the air like a guitar string, pulling ever tighter, ever higher a note, trembling under the strain.

I checked Cargo Bay 1 first. If some part of the ship was damaged, the airlock would need to be in working order for us to have any chance of fixing it.

Once the airlock and primary water tank were secure, I moved on to Cargo Bay 2. I tightened down the straps holding the food crates and backup water supply before moving farther in towards the repair supplies it held like precious breath.

The ship lurched under me, the ever-present rumble of the engine spooling up to a higher pitch.

The comm crackled overhead. "Intercept in two minutes, report to auxcon and brace for impact," came Quinn's voice, tight even through the distortion.

I joined him in the hall a few seconds later as we ran for the rear of the ship.

Mira was waiting when we arrived, grease splattering her clothing. She wiped her face and led us deeper into the room, squeezing around the tangled bulk of the engine to the cramped alcove pressed up against the back wall that I hadn't noticed before. The secondary control room, equipped with a bank of instrumentation, a steering yoke, a small screen showing multiple feeds of the ship's exterior, and a narrow set of four jump-seats.

The asteroid storm dominated the screen's feeds, eclipsing all but the thinnest slivers of moonlight. There was still a chance, *a good chance*, I reminded myself, that we would make it through this without a scratch. Even if the smallest of the asteroids were as big as a horse and shining a blinding white with reflected sunlight.

"Strap in," Quinn ordered. "With the extra speed, we've made the near edge of the cluster, but it'll be a close call if we can slip under it."

I slid into the back jump-seat, right behind Mark and nearest to the hull. Mira adjusted a final dial and strapped in beside me. Her hand was cold and clammy in mine, our fingers tangling and squeezing so tightly together that I didn't know where she ended and I began.

High-pitched ringing taps echoed through the room, the sound building and twisting in on itself like constant, deafening thunder directly overhead.

"Hull is holding — Shit!" Quinn broke off, staring at the screen where a boulder at least as tall as me was heading right for us. It eclipsed the camera completely before the feed went dead. He switched to another. Pulled hard left on the yoke, but it wasn't enough.

The ship heaved with the impact, lights flickering then cutting out entirely, the high sound of shearing metal tearing through me like the cry of a dying animal.

The gravity fluctuated with a nauseating swooping sensation but held on for now. Mira curled in on herself, eyes squeezed shut, hands — mine and her own — pressed to her ears. I wrapped my free arm

around her in the darkness and held on, face tucked to her shoulder and breathed until the shaking subsided and the sound dulled, then disappeared, leaving my ears ringing in its wake.

Mira slumped against me like her strings had been cut, hands dropping limp to her lap. I straightened a little to support her better, rubbing my thumb from our still joined hands over the back of her wrist, trying to offer what comfort I could.

There was the low roar of a backup generator turning over somewhere in the depths of the engine room, and moments later, the emergency lights came on in a wash of luminous orange.

Quinn shook his head and scrubbed a hand across his face before scanning across his dashboard. Only one of the external camera feeds had survived the storm, flickering badly and marred with static, but still coherent enough to make out a smear of jagged black against the dull grey-white of the ship's hull.

"Air pressure is stable," Quinn rasped. "The hull around the crew compartment held."

He expanded the remaining feed until it filled the screen, squinting at it, Mark peering over his shoulder to get a better look.

"Mira," he said, words dropping like stones into dark water, "come and take a look at this."

Mira stirred, sat up, her face wet and mask-flat under the dim lights. She squeezed my hand once before letting go to wipe her face. She freed herself of her harness with trembling fingers and moved towards the console, using the backs of the jump seats for balance.

I could see her face in back-lit profile as she took in the damage, see her lips pale into a thin bloodless line, see the growing furrow of her brow, and see the tension around her eyes draw ever tighter.

"What do you think?" Quinn asked, quietly.

Mira let out a slow, wavering breath, but when she spoke, her voice was steady. "The power line to the right wing maneuvering thruster is severed, and at least five of the solar panels are destroyed. This ship runs on an integrated power system, all of it is interconnected. It was the only way to get the ship ready in time, but it means that when part of it is damaged," — she gestured sharply towards the screen — "the whole system shuts down to prevent shorts or a fire."

She swallowed, eyes fixed on the screen. "The emergency backups will last for a while, but if we don't fix the thruster, we won't be able to land."

There was silence for a long moment as the information was absorbed.

Mark broke the quiet. "Well, that's not good, landing is the whole reason we're out here!"

Quinn shot Mark a look I couldn't quite decipher before turning back to Mira.

"Can you fix it?" he asked.

"Yes," Mira said, "but I'll have to go out on the wing to cut loose the damaged panels and replace the power line for the thruster manually. And" — she looked over at Mark — "I'll need a second set of hands."

Mark nodded, sobering under the gravity of the situation.

"Right," Quinn said, nudging Mira aside a bit to get a better look at the radar screen, "it looks like we're clear of the asteroid field now, but I'm getting some strange energy readings, like there might still be debris that's too small, or something larger moving too fast for the radar to pick up at this range. Mark, you'll be steering the ship from here until I can take control from the cockpit. Soren, help them suit up, then I'll need your help in the cockpit to monitor the radar and comms."

He looked up at Mira. "Do what you need to do. It doesn't need to be perfect, just workable enough to get us where we're going."

Mira nodded but didn't say anything, just moved aside as Quinn unbuckled.

He handed the yoke over to Mark, the transition marked with only a slight wobble of the ship. Quinn squeezed Mark's shoulder and said, voice the softest I'd ever heard, "Come back safe."

Quinn stepped back, nodded to his crew. "Good luck," he said, then turned on his heel and disappeared behind the bulk of the engine.

Mark watched him go, and, upon noticing Mira and me staring at him, shrugged, rocking the ship subtly. "Go on," he said, turning back to the controls and shooing us off, "I'll handle things here and meet

you in Cargo Bay 1 as soon as I can."

~

It was eerie in the hallway, emergency lights casting strange shadows and turning Mira's hair to flame. It was quiet. No air moving through the vents, no hum dogging my tracks. Our footsteps echoed hollow against the decking, a steady rhythm, a strange trance, only broken once we reached Cargo Bay 2.

Mira stumbled over the threshold, caught herself against the wall.

"Mira?" I asked, soft in the chill quiet.

She let her head fall against the wall, closed her eyes for a long moment. She let out a ragged puff of breath, and I could see the mist leave her lips, follow its slow tumbling path until it dissipated into the air.

"I'm alright," she whispered, voice tattered at the edges. "I just — I keep hearing the sound of the asteroid hitting the wing, the *scream* of the metal… And I know it's just a thing, a vehicle to get us from A to B, but I — *fuck*, I built this thing, *piece by piece*, and if something I spent so long on can be this *fragile*, then how much weaker will a patch job be? If we use all our energy, all our supplies to fix the wing now, what do we do when the next asteroid comes along, and we have nothing left to give?"

She took a deep, gulping breath. "I am *tired*, Soren, of making things only for them to break, and — and I don't know how much longer I can *keep going*."

I reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. She slumped into it, face twisted into an expression that *ached* somewhere deep inside my chest.

She curled into me, head resting in the crook of my neck. She let me hold her weight, and I took it up for as long as she needed.

"Together," I murmured. "As long as we're together, we can survive anything. So, no matter what comes, you'll have me, and — and I'll have you, and we'll figure it out." I took a breath. "You're the best engineer I've ever met — you built a *spaceship* out of *scraps* and it *works*! We're still here, and as long as we're alive, there is still hope."

"And **when**," I added, stressing the emphasis, "**when** we get the new

base set up, you can take a nice long vacation, and I'll fight anyone who tries to bother you."

Mira laughed wetly at that, pulling away, but not so far that she broke the circle of my arms. "You'd fight them for me? Really?"

"Of course!" I said, pulling myself up into an exaggerated mimicry of a boxer. "What, you don't think I'd win?"

She gave a true laugh at my posturing, and it broke my faux-serious facade. We laughed, foreheads pressed together, her brow unfurrowed and warm against mine.

"Ugh, get a *room* you two!" Mark exclaimed from the doorway, laughing when Mira flipped him off behind my back.

The sound followed him as he moved off into the other cargo bay, and we broke apart.

Mira wiped at her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered, squeezing my hand.

"*Always*," I replied, pouring every last drop of my adoration into the word.

~

I helped Mira gather the needed supplies — rubberized tools, a long coil of heavy-duty cable, and, of course, duct tape — and carried them into the other cargo bay while Mark finished checking over the airlock.

A few minutes later, I slid on her helmet for her, her own upward mobility restrained by the spacesuit's many hand-sewn layers. The helmet hissed as the air pressure equalized. She took an experimental breath and nodded that the air system was working properly, face washed out under the helmet's internal lights.

I completed a last check over both suits and, upon finding no problems, gave the go-ahead.

Mark climbed into the airlock first and attached himself to the spool of tether rope.

"Mira," I said, before she could join him, "stay safe, alright. I'll be here when you get back."

She nodded, a wane smile on her lips. "See you soon."

Then she followed Mark into the airlock, secured herself and all her supplies, and gave the signal that they were ready.

I pushed the console's comm button, opening a channel to the cockpit. "Prepped for airlock decompression," I reported, willing my voice level.

"Copy," came Quinn's terse reply. "I'll open the airlock from here. See them out the door, then report to the cockpit for monitoring."

As Quinn counted down to the release of the airlock, I held out a hand to the others, counting down in time. Mira tightened her grip on her tether, the clink of their equipment falling away to silence as the air was evacuated, leaving only vacuum in its wake.

"Airlock equalized to outside," Quinn reported.

I passed on the message, and Mira's affirmative reply crackled through the comm.

Mark opened the outer door and drifted out of the ship, tether unspooling behind him like silvery, slow-motion lightning.

Mira followed Mark out into the void, the hitch of her breath audible even over the comm as she stepped over the cusp.

"They're out," I told Quinn.

"Copy. Return to the cockpit," he replied, and shut off the connection.

I stared out at Mira for a long moment, her form bright against the black, glowing in the unfiltered sunlight like a miniature moon. I shook myself and ran for the cockpit.

Chapter Five

Lifeline

Mira

Mira could hear her own heartbeat, feel the blood rushing through her ears. When she looked up, the only things she saw were distant pinprick stars and the void swallowing them, and her, whole.

"Mira?" came Soren's voice crackling over the radio. "I'm with you, just breathe."

Mira nodded before realizing that Soren couldn't see her.

She took a deep, deliberately audible breath and focused her attention back to the wing, back to the dark, ragged-edged gash that had once been shining solar panels and an intact power line.

It made her ribs squeeze in her chest just looking at it, but her misplaced sympathy and self-immolating pity were not helpful right now. Soren and the rest of the crew were counting on her, and she would not let them down.

Mark was ahead of her on the wing, using the small handles to propel himself and attaching his harness to the incrementally anchored wire to keep from flying off into the void.

Mira followed him, leaving the new cable coiled in the airlock for now.

She made her way out along the wing and stopped beside Mark at the edge of the wound.

"How does it look?" Soren asked, sounding like they were a long way away.

"Bad," Mira croaked, "but I can fix it."

It was worse up close. The scar was deep and pockmarked with fragments of shattered solar panels and torn metal. Some of the larger pieces of panel were still floating nearby, clinging to the ship by wires

like frayed sinew.

Mira cut them free. Each sharp and soundless snap felt like cutting through one of her own nerves and left her hands deadened by the end of it. She kept going though, Mark working beside her to clear away the viscera.

She flexed her hands once the fragments were all free. They felt sticky, slicked with imagined mechanical gore. Mark bumped into her shoulder. She looked over reflexively and was met with the reflection of her own helmet, an oil-slick void mirrored infinitely upon itself. She looked away, dizzy, the hull seeming to warp horribly under her hands.

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed until the dizziness faded.

"We've finished clearing away the broken panels," she said as she opened her eyes again, focused on the shadow-dark smear on moon-white hull, and got to work.

Looking closer, she could see the glint of the severed power line buried deep in the epicentre of the impact. It would require some digging to get to, so repairing it was not an option in these conditions. Which meant they'd have to replace it outright with the new cord.

Connecting all the solar panels on this wing to the greater grid of the ship via the new power cord would be a long and difficult job as well, so they'd have to sacrifice the extra energy and keep the ship on low power mode until they could land and fix it properly.

For now, she would focus on getting the thruster online so that they *could* actually land.

"Original powerline not — not salvageable, at least until we can land. Connecting the undamaged panels to the new line, also impossible. We can get this thruster and the rest of the ship's grid online, but we'll have to stay in low power mode ‘til we land," Mira gritted out, eyes fixed, but unseeing at the center of the gash.

There was a slight pause before Soren responded. "That's alright, we can manage without — "

Their voice distorted and cut off, leaving cold, dead silence in its wake. A chill washed down Mira's spine like an icy wave. "Soren?" she called across the void. "Can you hear me?"

No response. Not even the background crackle of radio static, just *nothing*. Like they'd disappeared.

She turned awkwardly to look behind her, heart rate ratcheting up painfully. The ship was still there, light pouring from the cockpit windows. She let out a shaking breath. "Does anyone copy?"

Still nothing.

She looked over at Mark, prepared this time for the reflection. With the little flexibility afforded to her, she tapped the side of her helmet, then brought her hand down, palm up, and shook it side to side, asking *is your radio working?*

Mark brought his hand down in a sharp diagonal slash that needed no interpretation.

Soren and Quinn are most likely fine, Mira told herself. *This is a malfunction with the radio and* **not** *a new system-wide crisis. We need to move forward with the last agreed-upon course of action: getting the thruster online as soon as possible, no matter what.*

The airlock could only be operated from inside the ship. This was not as problematic as it could have been — Mira had all the tools she needed with her, and she knew how to fix the thruster — so all in all, it could be worse.

Getting back *in* would be an issue for the future. If need be, one of them could just crawl up and knock on the cockpit window until someone noticed and opened the lock. If she was being honest, Mira was tempted to crawl up there now to make sure nothing had gone catastrophically wrong, but no. No, she had a job to do, and she would get it done.

Mira gestured for Mark to stay where he was while she climbed further out towards the thruster.

The wing narrowed the farther she went, dropping off into dizzying black with only a forearm's length of grace on either side.

The cone-shaped thruster assembly protruded from the top of the wing by about half a meter, hulled with the same grey-white panelling as the rest of the ship. The mouth of the thruster was on the bottom of the wing, and Mira was pre-emptively dreading the twisting, falling, somersault-like motion that would be required to check it.

She made sure she was securely anchored to the guideline, then used her screwdriver to open the assembly's access panel. She looked for shorts, for the warp of melted plastic and fused wires, and let out a sigh of relief when she found none.

She pulled herself over the forward curve of the wing, eyes squeezed shut against the dizzying inversion of orientation. Mindful of the clip holding her to the ship and the tether twisting out behind her, she made her way to the mouth of the thruster and peered inside, checking for any damage.

Satisfied it was intact, she crawled back to the top of the wing and, once she'd steadied herself, gave Mark the sign for *all clear*.

He gestured back enthusiastically, and Mira rolled her eyes at him. They'd been friends a long time, since before they came to the bunker. He knew her better than anyone — except maybe Soren — and their approaches to problems usually complemented each other, but *little gods* could he be annoying when he wanted to be.

She hesitated for a long moment, listening to the static absence of sound, of Soren's voice in her helmet. She could still see the light from the cockpit, but all she could hear was the hushed whirr of the fans pumping air and the dull thud of her heartbeat.

She hummed along with the fans and the rising staccato of her heart as she climbed back towards the airlock to distract herself from the void, to fill the dead air.

Her hands were cramping by the time she made it all the way back to the airlock with Mark in tow. She took a moment to stretch them out and sink down to rest in the weak but grounding gravity field that radiated from the hull of the ship proper, letting her shoulders loosen and mind clear for the job ahead. Mark sat down beside her, his faceplate tipped up to the stars.

She nudged him eventually, and they discussed, as clearly as one can in space while wearing thick gloves and not being able to hear each other or see each other's faces, how best to go about installing the replacement powerline. They decided on the time-honored tradition of engineers in a jam: *duct tape*. It made sense; the moon had essentially no atmosphere, so drag or a lack of aerodynamics wouldn't be an issue, and once they landed, they could cut away the tape and install the cord properly for the return trip.

They got to work. Mark stood in the airlock and slowly let out the

power line while Mira, with a huge roll of duct tape on her wrist and the other end of the cord in one hand, made her way back out onto the wing. She carefully wired the new line into the thrusters' access panel, then secured it with a liberal application of tape. She worked her way back slowly, taping the cord down every half meter or so.

Something white flashed in the corner of her vision. Then she was blinded by a beam of light pointed directly into her face. This wasn't a passing reflection. This was deliberate. She looked up, squinting, and the beam abated a little, dancing away to rest on the wing just in front of her.

She traced the light back to its source. It was coming from the cockpit, a white point of light, a flashlight, held by the blurred silhouette that could only be Soren. Mira sat up on her knees and waved at them, smiling with helpless relief as the beam traced an urgent circle across her torso.

The light cut out for a second, then was back, drawing a line from Mira to the airlock, where Mark was still holding the remainder of the coiled power cord, then back to Mira. Mira frowned, understanding the request but not its purpose. She still had lots of air left, and Mark was fine. She gestured to the cable, then the tape, made the sign for *why*, the movement exaggerated as to be more easily read.

The beam darted again from Mira towards the airlock, then took a sharp turn out into the void surrounding the ship. Mira tracked its path as best she could, half-thinking that it was a mistake, a slip of the hand, that there would be nothing to see, like when she'd shone a flashlight straight up into the sky as a kid.

And then she saw it.

A white circle floating in space. The mark jittered, warped on one side, and Mira realized that it was reflecting off the hard-edged planes of a massive, wrecked starship. It was gutted, belly torn open and exposed to space, a relic of the war, dead and left to drift, forever on a patrol from which it would never return.

It was also, she realized belatedly, heading straight for her.

Mira watched it for a moment, trying to judge its speed and trajectory.

She had about three minutes to get back in the airlock and get the main power online before the collision was unavoidable.

She had to finish securing the cable.

Her legs shook under her as she scrambled forward.

Haste is the enemy of speed, she told herself. The tape was floating like seaweed in a rip current, sticking to itself.

It would have to do.

She stuck the cable down one crooked and half-secure section at a time. She kept moving. She ached to run, but wouldn't, *couldn't* until the job was done.

She could still hear the silence over her panting breaths. She missed Soren, at the same time, glad they were safe(er) inside the ship.

Darkness fell. It plunged the wing into a black so deep and inescapable that even Mira's helmet light only cast the faintest rim of illumination on the wing in front of her.

Her legs were numb by now, suit cutting off circulation. There was nothing below her, nothing tangible. Her stomach roiled at the thought of falling eternally. Of floating until there was nothing left to give. Of being consumed entirely.

Mira froze, unable to even breathe.

Two minutes.

There was a light in front of her. An oval of solid ground large enough to hold her.

Soren.

Mira scrambled to the light, ripping a new piece of tape while still in motion. The light moved with her, leading her back one step at a time. To safety. To Soren.

Mira connected the cord to the emergency port at the base of the wing and fell into the airlock with Mark.

One minute.

Soren was there to let her out of the airlock and helped strip off her gloves. Mira ran, as best she could with the bulk of her suit, to the engine room. Soren was behind her, with her always.

She scrambled into the engine room, primed the system with a series of switches, and yanked the master breaker back into position. It snapped into place like a reset bone. The ship trembled and surged with power, veering violently to the left and clear of the derelict ship's path.

Mira slumped to the floor gasping, pawing at her helmet but unable to find purchase. And then Soren was there. They pushed Mira's hands away gently and released the latches, sliding the helmet free of Mira's head.

Mira pulled them in until their foreheads rested together. They breathed together, sharing the same space, the same air, the same moment in time.

"You made it," Soren murmured eventually, their lips brushing against Mira's cheek.

Mira choked on a laugh. "You were right," she wheezed, "we figured it out."

Chapter Six

Vigil

I helped Mira up eventually. She winced as she realized all the places where her suit had cut off circulation.

We made our way back to Cargo Bay 1 and found Mark free of his helmet and trying futilely to pull one of his gloves off with his teeth.

I helped him out of his suit and, once he was freed, let him run a check on the airlock while I liberated Mira of the remainder of her suit.

Once everything was stowed away, we headed to the cockpit. Mira was still in her pajamas, having had no time to change before, and drooping with the exertion of moving around in the heavy suit and the adrenaline that must be crashing out of her blood. My own hands were still shaking, had been since the comms went dark a second before the derelict ship appeared on the radar.

Quinn was waiting for us when we entered the cockpit, twisted around in his seat to look as Mark slipped past us. Mark squeezed Quinn's shoulder, and I watched some of the hollow-eyed grief ease at his touch. Mark found his seat in the copilot's chair and sagged down into it, sweat plastering his hair flat against his forehead.

I glanced over at Mira as we slid into the back seats, a wide-eyed question of ' *what was that about?*'

Mira shrugged by way of response, eyes slipping shut as she slumped over to lay her head on my shoulder. I slouched down a little to ease any strain on her neck and rested my head atop hers in return.

We sat together, watching the moon, now so close that it filled the viewscreen with only a thin rim of star-pricked black surrounding it. It looked different up close, mottled with pale orange and the deep blue-black flows of ancient maria. The surface was broken by the deep craters and the pale multi-limbed crosshairs of impact rays. It was a

place ravaged by time and the interstellar elements, scars laced in white. A place broken and remade, and maybe, just maybe, a place we could call home.

A way forward.

A place to rest.

A place to put down roots and see what blooms.

I caught the glint of faceted glass ahead, the surface level of Luna 1 shining in the sun. Quinn twisted the ship around until our belly was parallel to the moon's surface. Luna was a low transparent dome spanning kilometers in profile, the vast array of solar panels surrounding it belaying the base’s hidden sprawl beneath the surface.

Mira sat up as the base came into view, shifted to twine her fingers with mine. I gave them a grateful squeeze.

"Together," she murmured, "whatever happens."

The ship shuddered as Quinn fired the landing thrusters, setting us down amongst the solar panels less than fifty meters from the base. There was no movement, no lights visible inside.

The crew turned to watch me as I closed my eyes, breathed, braced for the voices, the clawing hum of the Infected, and heard… nothing.

Nothing but fertile silence.

I opened my eyes, let out a shuddering breath, spoke past welling tears and a helpless grin.

"It's safe."

ACT THREE

Homecoming

Chapter One

Free

I woke to the ambient lights coming up like a slow sunrise and a warm body pressed to my side.

I drank in that feeling, that essence of comfortable and half-asleep with nothing to run from and nowhere I needed to be. Mira snorted in her sleep from where she was half draped across my chest, her expression peaceful and hair loose from its bandanna to tangle wildly around her head like a sunburst.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead and slipped from the bed.

I pulled on a soft-woven robe and resettled the blankets around Mira, brushing a few stray locks from her face.

The floor was always cold in the mornings on Luna 1, but I couldn't feel it through my thick wool slippers as I did the necessities then shuffled out into the kitchen. Our cat, Birch, wound around my legs in a blur of white frosted fur and bold black strips, chirruping softly while I prepared her breakfast.

It had been a year since our first scouting mission to Luna 1. A year of repairing and resettling and upgrading the base's systems to handle all of Demeter's nearly one thousand former residents. Things had steadied now, settled into a rhythm of ebb and flow that seemed to suit us.

I set Birch's dish down just as the kettle came to a boil and promptly clicked itself off. I gave Birch a parting stroke, smiling at her low rumbling purr.

I stood to pour the hot water into the two mugs I had set out, added the little metal infusers filled with fragrant tea leaves and left them to steep while I retrieved the goat milk from our small fridge and a jar of honey from the cabinet.

The kitchenette of our apartment was small, but very functional for what it was, its counters and shelves filled with a growing collection of Mira's work, the carefully pieced copper and brass metalwork taking the form of cups, bowls, and most recently the kettle, all smooth lines and fluid form, gleaming under the rising lights. An old framed picture of my family hung on the far wall, a mingling of past and present.

I took up the mugs and made my way back to the bedroom, the light thumping steps of Birch trotting along behind me.

Mira was sitting up against the padded headboard with a book in her hands, reading a retelling of an old Greek myth. She looked up when I came over, setting the mugs down on the bedside table.

"Good morning, darling," she said, voice still rough from sleep. She reached out, drawing me down into a soft collision of our brows.

"How'd the kettle work?" she asked as we diverged again.

She marked her place and set the book aside, scooting over a little to make room for me to sit, an opening that was immediately claimed by Birch, the little traitor.

"Really?" I asked the cat, "I feed you and this is the thanks I get?"

Birch stared at me, unimpressed, claws flexing as she kneaded at the bed.

Mira laughed but took pity on me and scooped Birch into her lap where she immediately curled into a contentedly purring ball.

I heaved an exaggerated sigh but got under the still-warm covers and settled back against the headboard.

"The kettle worked perfectly, love," I answered finally, passing over her mug of tea, "Let me know what you think of the tea, it's a new blend."

Mira hummed thoughtfully, giving her tea a stir to dredge up any settled honey before taking a sip.

Her eyes widened in surprise, "Ooh, this is good! This is that plant you've been working with, right? The uh — " she snapped her fingers, earning a glare from Birch.

"The chocolate mint?"

Mira nodded and took another sip. "That's the one!"

I grinned, taking up my own cup. "It is. The plant's almost doing *too* well to be honest, starting to escape its bed. I'll need to cut it back today or it'll take over the whole garden."

"Mmm, 'wouldn't mind a whole garden of this," she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It even smells like chocolate!"

"I'll be sure to leave, or should I say *leaf* you some, then."

Mira snorted a laugh into her tea. "Oh, that was terrible! But thank you, darling."

"Any time, love," I said, and slipped my free hand into hers on the covers between us.

We sipped in comfortable silence for a while before my eyes drifted to the book laying on the covers.

"What do you think of the book so far?" I asked, nodding to the faded black and rich orange of its faux-gilt cover. The book, *Circe* by Madeline Miller, had been a housewarming gift from Mark and Quinn when we moved into our apartment and we were just getting around to reading it.

"I'm enjoying it. Circe is… determined, driven. She gave up her freedom to practice her craft, but sort of gained back in the process. She can't leave her island, but she knows every inch of it, every plant, every animal, every hidden cave. The nymphs who joined her were outcasts, were thrown from their families, were left behind. And now they can all just…" she shrugged, thoughtful, "*live*. By their own terms."

I squeezed her hand. "I'm glad you like it, we'll have to thank Mark and Quinn for it tonight."

"Definitely," Mira said, taking another sip of her tea, "what are your plans for the day?"

"Probably get some breakfast and spend most of the day in the gardens. You?"

"Much the same. I have some orders I want to get started on in the

studio, and a personal project that I want to finish up today. And before you ask," she added as I opened my mouth, "it's a *surprise*, darling, you'll see it when it's finished." She glanced up at the clock. "Speaking of which, I should get going."

She set her empty mug aside and climbed from the bed disturbing Birch in the process, who trotted off to her cat-stand in the living room in disgust.

Mira leaned over for a chaste but lingering kiss that I happily returned. She swept up my drooping mug and placed it safely on the nightstand without looking, her callused fingers gently cupping my jaw.

"See you later, darling," she murmured, warm and laced with chocolate mint.

I leaned into her touch, pressing a kiss to the heel of her palm.

"See you later," I replied, matching her tone.

~

The dining hall was buzzing already despite the early hour. It was a large room, big enough to hold most of Luna 1's population at once. The ceiling was almost entirely made of lightly tinted glass that let in a flood of sunlight when it was available, as it was now, and an unfettered starscape when it wasn't.

I joined the line curling around the edge of the room, drinking in the aroma of coffee and warm spiced cider, the smoky savour of cooking meat, and the indescribable scent of rich bread fresh from the ovens, all cut through with the sharp floral and citrus of the bouquets that decorated each table. The tables were made of the same utilitarian grey metal that featured heavily in our forebears' design style, with benches bolted in parallel on either side. They were different now than when we first arrived, softened, the benches covered in a bright array of pillows, and handmade runners woven in a curling motif ran down the center of each table.

I was so distracted by dreams of breakfast that I hadn't noticed Pat and Carrie join me in the line. They helped in the gardens sometimes, lifelong friends who had travelled the world together in the Before. They were wizened now, but their memories remained, making them an invaluable source of knowledge about many of the rarer plants. They remembered the stories too, of the Before and what came after,

carried them in their bruises and scars and smile-lines.

It was only the smile-lines deepening now, their scars, like mine, faded but not forgotten. We moved forward instead, towards a future that was brighter, kinder, and warm with possibility. Each day, a step in the right direction.

Right now, each step was towards a delicious meal.

We surveyed the available options as we neared the front of the line. Most of the kitchen was dedicated to preparing food for tonight's event, so the breakfast selection was more limited than usual. I picked a plate of French toast accompanied by a small bowl of fresh fruit and followed Carrie and Pat to sit in a booth that adjoined the bank of ground-level windows that rimmed the room.

I ate while my companions shared the freshest gossip of the day so far, comparing notes on who would be going with whom to tonight's event. I kept an ear on them — it never hurt to be up to date — and watched out the window as a fresh delivery of water arrived in the form of a massive block of ice excavated from one of the moon's shadowed craters and dragged by air-tight bulldozer back to the base. It would supplement our already robust water reclamation program, an added insurance against a shortage. The ice shone stark against the starry black of the surrounding space, the bulk of it throwing up little contrails of lunar dust as it continued towards the loading dock.

We had come a long way in the last year and a half. Luna 1 had been in rough shape after more than half a decade of complete neglect, though most of the plants and a hive of bees had managed to survive. There was still work to be done even now, more sharp edges to round off and small comforts to add, but it was ours, and for now that was enough.

"You and Mira will be joining us for the festivities tonight, won't you, Soren?" Pat asked, drawing my attention back to the table.

I nodded in lieu of answering, caught with my mouth full.

"Wonderful." Pat smiled. "We've been looking forward to it since we arrived."

"We have our outfits picked out and everything," Carrie added, then turned to squint accusingly at Pat. "I still can't believe I let you pay for my jumpsuit back then. I'll get you back one of these days, just you wait!"

"You can *try*," Pat replied sweetly, unperturbed by the threat, "but the euro hasn't existed in over a decade, *and* if I recall correctly, *you* bought my shoes for me on that trip, so we are, in fact, *even*."

"We'll see about that, won't we?" Carrie retorted playfully, begrudging amusement obvious in her voice.

"That we will," Pat said, concluding the dance with something like a verbal curtsy.

With the matter settled for now, she turned back to me.

"They are lovely pieces," Pat told me, “all rich green velvet and floral embroidery — "

"The very height of fashion back in the day," added Carrie.

" — And they'll go wonderfully with the foliage of the gardens," Pat continued. "Don't you think, Soren?"

"Definitely," I answered, taking a sip of my water and almost choking on it at her next question.

"So," Pat said, both of them leaning in conspiratorially, "do you have anything *special* planned for tonight?"

I thought of the little package I had kept tucked in the very back of my closet for the last week so that Mira wouldn't find it.

"Perhaps," I replied, ignoring the blush burning across my cheeks to scoop up another bite of fruit.

My companions exchanged a knowing glance and let the matter drop, moving on to their plan of attack against the mint plants for the day.

I knew my version of *special* wouldn't quite be what they were expecting, but a promise was a promise, and I intended to keep mine.

~

After breakfast, I made my way through the base's labyrinthine halls to the supply room where the gardeners kept their tools. We were all volunteers here, taking turns throughout the week, and occasionally rotating off to help with cooking, or one of the craft studios, or just a well-deserved rest. I had found a distinct joy in the tending of growing things and helping to feed my community. I was wanted here, but not

so critically needed that I felt guilty about leaving the others to their own devices for a few days.

I pulled on my coveralls, the fabric a rich blue and soft to the touch, though right now it was hard to tell under all the soil stains.

Once I was fully decked out, I checked the master list of tasks that needed to be done. I scanned across the list written on the whiteboard that covered almost half the wall. *Let's see… Mucking out the second flock of goats, shearing sheep, harvesting tomatoes from the hydroponics greenhouse, scrubbing out one of the algae tanks, stocking an aquaculture tank, a handful of jobs with the grain fields — no thank you — aaand, ah, there it is, prepping the ornamental garden for tonight.*

The coloured magnets that represented the volunteers working today were scattered across the board, most clustered around the sheep and grain projects, and Mark's firmly anchored with the algae tanks. Only a few were positioned beside garden prep. Perfect.

I gathered up my tools — a pair of trimming shears, a shovel, and a rake, among others — tucked a pair of work gloves in my pocket and made my way to the ornamental garden.

It was ornamental by name alone, almost every plant here was edible, medicinal, or both, though the paths winding through the space were grass-shod and wider than what was usually found in the other gardens, all leading towards a huge circular open area that Mira liked to call 'the confluence'.

It was one of my favourite places outside of our apartment, the air scented with a riot of herbs and flowers.

I set down my tools against the low rock wall that encircled the conflux and just… stood for a moment, eyes closed, and face tipped up to the sun. I breathed, felt the expansion and easy release of my lungs. I'd been free of pain for months now, aside from the short-lived and satisfying ache of worked muscles. I had grown stronger and gained enough weight that my bones were no longer visible through my skin.

My clothes — my *life* — were soft, well-fitting, and wholly my own.

Chapter Two

Safe

Mira

Mira wound down through the tunnels to the lower craft studios, one hand holding a breakfast wrap and the other tucked into her jumpsuit pocket. She didn't run — she didn't *need* to run anymore, but her steps were eager, pointed. She nodded a greeting to the few other craftspeople heading in the opposite direction and kept going until she reached the door of her studio.

She unlocked the door and slipped through into the darkened space, bits of scrap metal glinting in the half-light that poured in from the hall and abruptly cut off as she closed the door behind her.

She let out a breath and smiled to herself. She'd been working on this project for months, a good part of that time dedicated to just sourcing the rarer components. Now it was almost finished, just needing a last few adjustments and a final polish.

She took a bite of her wrap and flicked on the overhead light.

A haphazard stack of finished commissions sat on the table nearest the door, and various tools were scattered around the room, each with its own designated space. Wren's toolbox sat in a place of honor under her design board next to her main workbench in the center of the room, creating a path that led to the supply closet at the very back, filled with huge rolls of metal and long strands of solder waiting to be sculpted.

She settled in at her workbench and, from a hidden cabinet, retrieved her current project. She studied it for a long moment, brushing her fingers over the fluid curves that gave way to stone and unfinished metal. She looked for any defect, any weakness that might cause it to deform if she continued and found none.

She smiled to herself again and got to work.

The hours ticked past like dripping water, her body and mind

flowing through the work. She had time for this now, to *enjoy* the simple act of creation; curiosity, challenge, and passion, the only things driving her forward. Here, there was no crushing responsibility, no looming threat of *fail and people will die*. She could rest now, and she did sometimes, but it was not in her nature to remain sedentary for long. She preferred to be here, or helping Soren in the gardens, but did it because she *wanted to*, safe in the knowledge that others would take up the work when she stepped out, and invaluable all the same.

Her stomach gurgled in protest eventually, and when she looked up, the clock showed it was already a little past noon. She set down her tools and stretched her arms up over her head, savouring the smooth rotation of her joints and the supple flex of her muscles.

She stood, pulling a clean drop cloth over her nearly finished project before moving to pack a few of her finished commissions into a box. She stepped out into the hall, making sure to lock the door behind her to dissuade anyone from sneaking a peek.

Her footsteps were steady as she climbed up the shallow incline of the hall, the walls morphing from rough carved tunnels to smooth built structure as she ascended.

She shifted the box to her hip as she entered the dining hall. It was around half-full now, quieter than it was when she had visited in the morning, but still enough that the soothing hum of conversation and clinking dishes comfortably filled the space. She picked up a few portions in to-go containers along with the necessary utensils and was off again in the direction of the garden supply room.

There, she studied the task list for a long moment before she found Soren's token, a magnet in rich blue, positioned beside the ornamental garden. Mira slipped through the doors out into the gardens, careful not to spill any of her load.

It took Mira a few minutes more to locate Soren once she finally arrived in the garden, but she found them eventually, waist-deep in the understory of a fragrant shrub.

"You need some help?" Mira called, laughing when Soren emerged from the underbrush, twigs still stuck in their hair.

Soren smiled, eyes sparkling in the sunlight as they made their way towards where Mira had set down her cargo.

"Fancy seeing you here," Soren said, brushing their forehead against

Mira's. "I'm surprised anything could be so important as to drag you from your mysterious '*project*' today."

Mira plucked the wayward twig from Soren's hair and handed it back to them.

"Everyone has to eat," she said, leading Soren over to the low stone wall where she had left the food, "and I didn't want the masses breaking down my door for these." She patted the box of commissions by way of explanation and sat, Soren settling in close beside her.

"It's no wonder, your work is always so beautiful, love." They scanned their surroundings. "Do you think we have enough time to eat before they track you down?"

"Hard to tell. I'm sure I was spotted in the dining hall, and word always travels fast with them, but…" she trailed off.

They were being watched.

A bush rustled nearby, a flicker at the edge of her vision. Soren stiffened beside her, eyes widening subtly as they glanced around the clearing.

There was a high chittering sound, and then they emerged, *children*, a whole swarm of them. They clustered around Mira, their questions and exclamations overlapping as to become one noise. Soren edged away from the chaos, the corners of their eyes tightening.

Mira took action to quiet the swarm.

"Alright, simmer down!" she exclaimed, and they did, their excitement transmuted into hushed whispers and restless bouncing on the tips of their toes.

Mira looked over the crowd. Their eyes were bright, every one of them trained on her. Their clothes were stained, patched, and well-loved — frolicking clothes, she remembered one of their parents calling them.

She smiled at the eager cluster. "I have something for all of you — " The whispering increased in volume, taking on a hissing quality as they jostled each other, twisting and swaying like seaweed too close to breaking waves.

"BUT," Mira continued, raising her voice to be heard, "you each

have to wait your turn, and there will be no grabbing, yelling, or fighting. Otherwise, you all have to wait until tomorrow to get anything. Understood?"

They nodded vigorously, quieting further.

Mira grinned. She looked over at Soren, who gave her a small smile, and relaxed back into their original position.

Focusing back on the crowd, she took up the box onto her lap, the children's eyes tracking the movement as they leaned in to get a better look.

"You first," Mira said, beckoning forward a girl no older than five near the front with tightly coiled pigtails.

The girl bounced up to her, grinning, hair bobbing along behind her.

Mira reached into the box and produced a little smooth-edged metal cow with a rope halter and lead; feet anchored to a narrow block of wood with wheels attached to the sides.

The girl took it gently by the belly, gave a stage-whispered thanks, and scurried off to play.

The others watched her go before snapping their attention back to Mira.

A boy shuffled forward next and received a copper fish with bright-etched scales.

And so it went, until the box was empty and the last of the swarm had dissipated back into the undergrowth.

Mira let out a breath and set the box aside, slumping more comfortably back into her seat and leaning her weight back on her arms. The whole kerfuffle had lasted no more than five minutes but had felt much longer.

She hoped the food was still warm.

She felt the familiar warmth of Soren's gaze on her and rolled her head over to look at them.

"You alright?" she asked at the same time Soren did. They stared at each other for a moment before bursting out giggling.

Mira shifted her weight and held out a hand for Soren, which they took, and drew them in closer so that they were pressed together from knee to shoulder.

Soren smelled of fresh wet earth, highlighted by the sharper scents of chocolate mint and rosemary as they slung an arm around Mira's waist, thumb stroking slow and absent arcs just under her ribs.

Mira reached over and retrieved the food — still warm, thankfully — and passed a container to Soren.

They opened it, closing their eyes as they inhaled the umami-rich steam of the teriyaki trout over rice on offer today.

They ate together, savouring the mingled flavours and bright pops of ginger and garlic, enjoying the sunlight on their skin and the quiet calls of seed-birds hunting in the underbrush.

The others, their *community,* continued on with the work around them, like a root system passing life from one hand to the next. There was more to do, there would *always* be more, but possibility bloomed sweeter with every breath, every step forward.

Chapter Three

Loved

Evening fell eventually, the halls and galleries lit in shades of blue and silver speckled with tiny orange-gold stars that seemed to flicker as Mira and I strolled past on our way to the gardens.

Her jewellery glinted in the low light; an intricate cuff-style earring that matched my own — one of the first art pieces she ever made — with dangling loops of fine chain half-hidden by her hair, which was down and curling gently around her face.

I took her calloused hand in mine and thought of the small box I had tucked into the fold of my deep blue button-down shirt. The shirt was tied at my waist by a handwoven scarf of the same colour, struck through with mingled rays of a vibrant copper. Mira had a similar scarf, though hers was predominantly copper with a vine-like motif in blue, and she had chosen to wear it as a short cape gathered at the shoulders and fastened to her black vest with a pin of her own making, the dangling ends just brushing the top of her gently flared black pants. The cape dipped and flowed with her steps, drawing emphasis to the musculature of her well-toned arms. She smiled when she caught me looking, radiant under the cool lights.

The hallway swelled with people as we grew closer to the gardens, most with scarves or sashes of their own, a whole spectrum of colour interweaving along with their owners.

Mark, Quinn, and Aspen had joined us somewhere along the way, decked out with their own sashes of a rich warm red-brown shot with streaks of shining silver-grey for the men, while Aspen wore a black jumpsuit under a flowing skirt of bruised reds and ochre orange that split open at the front, tied at their waist with a thick-woven belt of deep gold. We chatted as we walked, Quinn with his remaining arm draped over Mark's shoulder, and Mark with his around Quinn's waist. It was nice to see them so at ease, laughing at something Mira had said. There was a wonder to this, to comfort and love so abundant that

it seemed to flow ever-growing through the air and to curl welcome and *warm* in my chest. It was connection, I realized, community, the culmination of years of work and love, and steadfast survival that had brought us to this moment.

We emerged into a sea of colour and sound.

The garden was filled with people, nearly the entire population of the base, with more still trickling in from other entrances, all dressed in a mix of old earth garments and new pieces struck through with embroidery and adorned with a vibrant mix of woven accessories. Pat and Carrie were there as promised, woven gold sashes gleaming against rich green velvet. I waved to them, and they smiled back, lifting their cups in greeting.

A song with a deep, rhythmic base that shook the air like a heartbeat emanated from the center of the garden, people dancing along in a swirling, twisting pattern that was felt much more than it was learned. I watched, transfixed, as the song calmed and ended with a last wavering, rising, hopeful note.

Quinn and Mark veered off towards the food as Mira and I headed for the confluence, where the first ringing notes of the next song were beginning to play from the ancient sound system.

We wove our way forward as some of the crowd dispersed to get food or simply sit on the rocks ringing the area in pairs or small groups to nurse mugs of cider, leaving the confluence still busy but not quite as bustling.

It was a bright song, high and driving with a mix of indescribable strings and rasping drums that drove us half skipping, half dancing in tumbling spirals, hand in hand under a swirl of lights, almost giddy with the feeling. *But I'm alive*, promised the song, *I'm alive!*

It rolled to a stop eventually, leaving us breathless and laughing despite ourselves.

A new song followed on its heels, this one slow and sweet.

Mira smiled, cheeks flushed and eyes bright, as she looped her arms over my shoulders and I curled my own around her waist. We swayed close, grasses rooted in the same fertile earth and moved by the same warm and welcome wind.

It's here where our pieces fall in place, said the song, *where we keep the*

light we're given, can lose and call it living, drift and call it dreaming.

I rested my brow against Mira's, lost in the song, in her eyes, in the warmth of her pressed against me.

We breathed together, the world falling off and away, and it was just us.

Us despite it all, us who survived, who healed, who saved each other.

For all the love you left behind, you can have mine.

~

Later in the evening, much later when the music had quieted to a murmur and the snack tables were almost empty and only a few stragglers were left, we sat beside a small fire in one of the garden's many nooks. It was a biofuel fire, not wood or coal, but what mattered was that it was clean and warm, and safe to roast marshmallows on.

Mira and I leant against each other under a blanket, careful to keep the fabric away from the butter-yellow flames as we slowly rotated long metal skewers between sticky fingers.

Our friends had joined us earlier, laughing and mourning and remembering, and looking forward to the future.

Now it was just us, in our own little cocoon of firelight.

Mira pulled her marshmallow from the fire when it was perfectly golden-brown and just starting to darken on the edges. I had yet to achieve that result, mine always a little darker on one side than the other, but I almost preferred it that way, imperfect, yet delicious.

As Mira shifted to reach one of the sweet crackers to put her marshmallow on, I reached into my shirt to retrieve the little box I had tucked there hours ago. I'd been waiting for the perfect moment to give it to her, and here, warm and content with no eyes or expectations weighing on us, just seemed *right*.

I drew out the box while Mira was distracted, drew in a breath, and asked.

"Do you want some chocolate with your marshmallow?"

Mira froze, her marshmallow hovering centimetres from the

cracker. She turned to blink at me owlishly.

"What did you just say?" she asked, voice low and quiet.

I grinned and took the drooping skewer gently from her hands, replacing it with the box.

She opened it and stared in disbelief at the glossy bar of chocolate inside.

"It's made from the very first cocoa beans the trees produced," I explained softly. "I wasn't quite sure on the recipe, so hopefully it's not too bitter — "

I was cut off by the blanket falling from my shoulders as Mira wrapped me with a sideways hug, careful of the skewer I still held, her face buried in my shoulder.

"It's perfect, *perfect*… I can't believe you actually —" She drew back slightly to wipe at her face with her free hand, cradling the chocolate between us. "*Thank you.*"

I smiled helplessly and brushed a stray lock of hair out of her face. "Of course, my love, I did promise after all."

"We were going to share it," Mira remembered, "we *are* going to share it. Toast up a mallow for yourself. We'll try it together."

"Together," I echoed, voice catching like a broken record.

I rewarmed her marshmallow and toasted my own at the edge of the fire as she assembled the s'mores, gentle as she broke off two small pieces of chocolate, licking her fingers clean of any fragments.

She accepted the marshmallows and placed them reverently atop the chocolate and between the crackers. She handed me mine before picking up hers with subtly trembling hands.

She hesitated, staring into the fire, eyes gone distant.

"Hey," I nudged her, holding up my dessert, "to what came before."

Mira tapped her s'more against mine in a muted toast.

"To what comes next."

Her eyes fluttered shut as she chewed.

I watched her expression, watched for any hint of disgust or dissatisfaction and found… nothing but peace.

I looked away, blinking at the sudden sting of my eyes. I took a bite, teeth breaking through layers of *crisp* and *sweet* and *soft*. The flavors mingled, light and earthy and bitter-sweet.

"Soren? You ok?" Mira asked quietly.

I wiped my eyes reflexively and was surprised by the moisture I found there.

"Yeah," I said, voice rougher than I expected, "I'm ok, it's just" — I gestured vaguely — "a lot."

A warm weight settled on my shoulders as Mira draped the blanket back over me.

"I know," Mira murmured, "we've come a long way."

She shifted closer, wrapping an arm around me as I leaned into her.

We sat in comfortable silence together for a long moment, just watching the fire. I could feel her breathing, a slow and resounding constant.

"I have something for you, too," Mira murmured eventually, shifting to retrieve a slim bundle of waxed cloth from her pocket.

The sweet scent of beeswax greeted me as she handed it over, fabric faintly tacky with her body heat. I unwrapped it, breath catching at the first glint of luminous metal. The cloth fell away to reveal an ornately carved scarf pin. It seemed to glow in the firelight, a glossy copper relief of a lush and sturdy tree with twining roots wrapped around…

"Is that from the surface?" I asked, awed.

Mira nodded. "It is. I wanted you to have something to remember all of this, an anchor, no matter what comes in the future."

I brushed my thumb over the rough texture of the dark, almost black lunar maria, the stone glinting with flecks of blue and silver and so thoroughly entwined with the tree's smooth metal roots that they could never again be separated.

"Together," I whispered, the word an oath, a vow, "whatever comes."

"Together," Mira promised, a return, a closed loop, a well-tied knot.

And I knew this was only a respite, that we couldn't stay here forever, that eventually we would have to go back.

But for now, for now we could linger in this sanctuary, together in the warmth of the fire for a little while longer.

Epilogue

Keep The Light

One day, many years from now, we'll return to Earth.

It will test us: our convictions, our community, our resilience, our *love*.

But we will *not* be broken.

And this will *not* be our tragedy.